The Art of Spümcø and John K.

"Powdered Toast Man", 1992.

The Art of Spümcø and John K.

By John Kricfalusi

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Preface
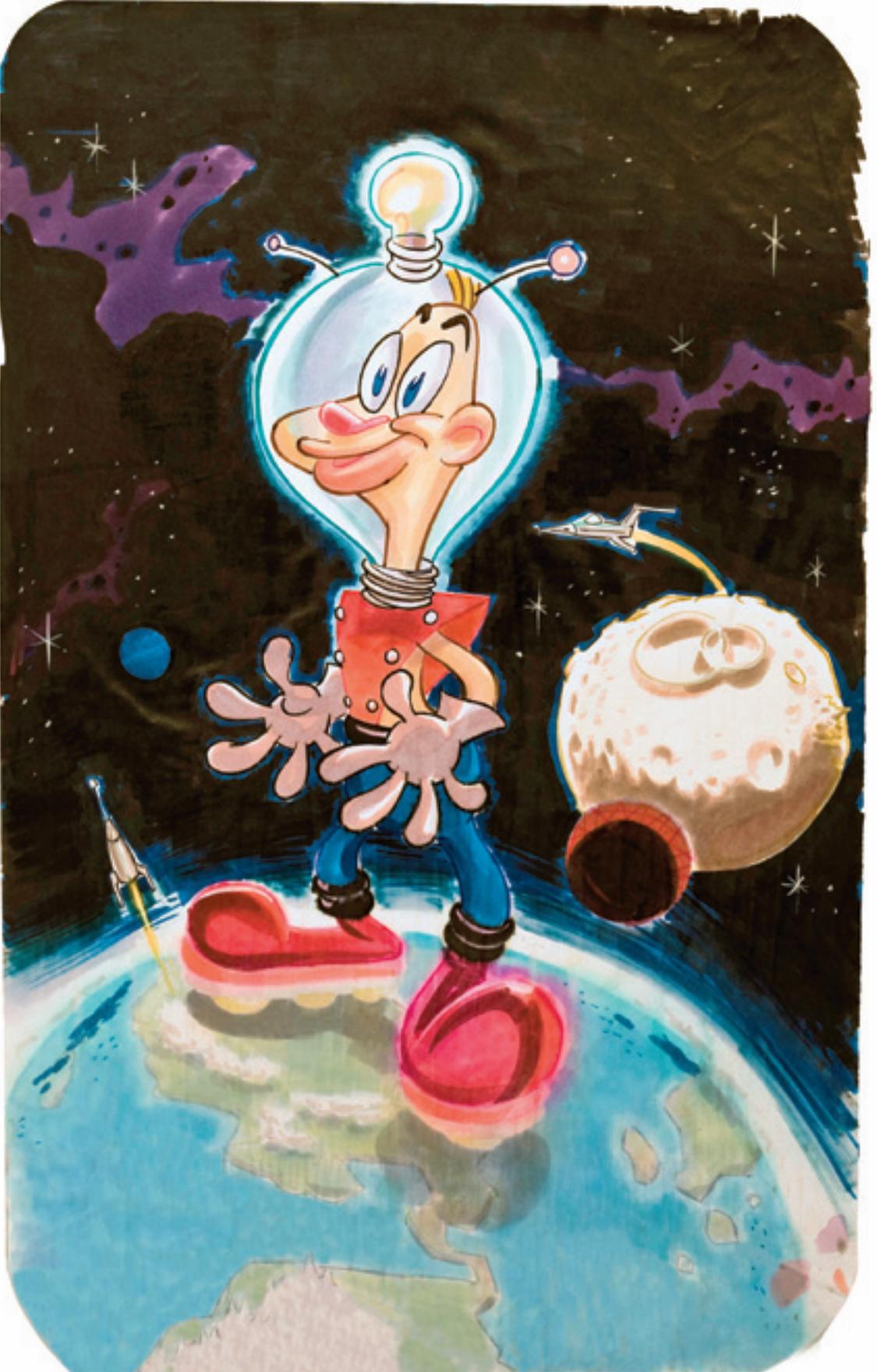
This book has been a long time coming. People have urged me for years to make a coffee-table book filled with artwork from Spümcø's cartoons. I collect these kinds of cartoon books myself, mainly for the artwork, and I'm usually frustrated by books that have tiny postage stamp–sized artwork and voluminous text filled with the author's opinions of this same artwork which you can't see very clearly. Now, I find myself in the writer's seat, and hoping to make this a different kind of animation book.

I've said many times before that there really isn't just one Spümcø style trapped in time. It's a way of thinking that can lead to a variety of different visual styles. The actual imagery and drawing is always changing, and is a product not only of my own tastes and whims, but those of the varied and talented cartoonists I've worked with. The Spümcø approach is to try new things and not get stuck in a rut. I always encourage my artists to find something unique within themselves to add to the cartoons. Over the years I've worked with many different crews, and I've found that the product always reflects *who* did the drawings or the paintings. I influence them for sure, but they also influence me. I've been lucky enough to work with some of the most talented and unique cartoonists in the business, many of whom have gone on to carve out their own niches, develop recognizable styles, and establish their own fan bases.

My individual influences are where the Spümcø look started, with classic cartoons and Hollywood entertainment in general—the attitudes, skills, and talents of performers from the 1930s through the 1960s. I mention attitude because a lot of what constitutes the Spümcø style is not just the drawing or even the story content, but my own personal attitude, forged mostly out of enjoying popular entertainment from a period before I was born.

The cartoons are also a document of my own life adventures. My family and childhood friends have inspired a lot of my stories and characters. My dad is easily my biggest influence. He is the authority figure that I rebel against and mercilessly caricature in so many of my cartoons.

All I've ever wanted is to be able to work in a cartoon studio that was fun, creative, and encouraged talented people to create the magic that only cartoonists can make. Unfortunately, by the time I started working in animation, there were no studios that wanted anything to do with that. Cartoons by the 1980s were no longer supposed to be fun, silly, creative, or magical. There was no place like the great Termite Terrace at Warner Bros. where I could just learn the ropes. If I was ever going to have a fun job doing what I loved, I would have to upset the whole system and build a studio that not only encouraged creativity, but created a production system that allowed creativity to flourish. If I had known how many obstacles were going to stand in my way when I started, I don't think I would have had the confidence or fortitude to move forward. But I did what I needed to do so I could draw funny cartoon stories and get them onto people's screens. This is the story of how it happened.

—John Kricfalusi

Me and my mother, 1955.

Entertainment is Lies

My earliest memories are vague and probably inaccurate, but what is most important to this book are the impressions left on me from these early years. Hazy images from pop culture, cartoons, and comics stirred my creative juices as a child, and started me on an artistic path and worldview that led me to develop what has generally become thought of as the "Spümcø style."

Life on the base.

Saturday Matinees at the Movies

I was a Canadian air force brat living in Germany, and every weekend my dad would take me to the base's movie theater for the Saturday kiddie matinee. This was the highlight of my week.

We would sit in the big theater and stare up at the huge screen that showed *The Three Stooges*, old-time movie serials like *Batman* and *Commando Cody*, and my favorite thing of all, cartoons.

Cartoon Features

I remember seeing not only Disney features, but odd foreign animated films too. Every Christmas they screened *The Snow Queen* a Soviet animated feature that was made in a hodgepodge of styles. Parts of it looked modern and extravagant, in a Disney-ish *Sleeping Beauty* style, while other parts felt like late-thirties Max Fleischer cartoons. I didn't make these observations until many years later; all I knew at the time was that the movie terrified me.

Mister Magoo

What remains most vivid from these weekend matinees is the title sequence to the *Mister Magoo* shorts. His name was written on the screen in bold, cartoony letters, and Magoo would stumble out and stare at the audience through the double *O* in his name. This pure, abstract, unreal magic sold me on cartoons as being the coolest invention ever. Nothing about it made a lick of sense, yet it was all so real and convincing to a five-year-old kid sucking up new information every minute of every day.

Batman

Batman serials made another big impression on me. Here was this guy in a lumpy suit with an underage kid for a sidekick, gallivanting around the city at night, beating up bad guys. At the end of each episode it appeared as if Batman and Robin were dead. They'd get riddled with bullets and plummet off a thirty-story building and smash into bits on the pavement. The criminals would peer out of the window and say, "Well, that's the end of Batman and Robin! Heh, heh, heh! That'll teach 'em to mess with bullets!"

The first couple times I saw this happen, I left the theater devastated. "Batman and Robin are dead!" I thought. "Guess they'll have to come up with some new heroes next week." But next Saturday Batman and Robin would be there, and the serial would start with a recap of the end of the previous episode. "*In our last episode, we saw Batman and Robin land on the window of the villains' hideout thirty stories up ...*" Then, Batman and Robin would look inside the hideout, see that the bad boys had guns, and decide not to risk their mortal flesh in front of the bullets. Instead, they would sneak up to the top of the building, drop down through the sunroof, and land on the bad guys, pinning their heads between their colorful underpants.

It didn't take long for me to figure out that the cliff-hangers were always lies, but I was still amazed each week to see the clever ways Batman and Robin would avoid getting killed by something that could easily kill all of us who don't have special underpants and a team of writers to wriggle us out of impossible situations.

I learned an important lesson: Entertainment is lies, and it doesn't have to make sense. What makes entertainment so much more interesting than reality is that anything can happen in this world of made-in front of the bullets.

Batman also inspired my first acting. I wore my Batman pajamas to bed every night, and after my parents fell sleep, I would wrap a towel around my neck as a cape, and sneak into the living room. I'd bound across the furniture, jumping from the chair to the couch, rolling onto the floor, vanquishing invisible foes and swatting their bullets with the back of my hand. My dad caught me one night, and I'm sure it was Batman's first true defeat.

The Caped Crusaders
in their special underpants.

Getting Sick

I got sick a lot when I was a kid and really enjoyed it. There were many perks for diseased little boys back then: great television shows, skipping school, toys and games, and, if you were really lucky, a trip to the hospital! I loved being served meals in bed. The food would arrive on a tray with each dish carefully covered by an aluminum dome, so it was always a surprise to lift the lid and discover the steaming treats underneath. This was my introduction to unearthly delights like creamed peas, tapioca pudding, and boned chicken in agar.

The hospital is also where I discovered one of life's greatest pleasures: the sponge bath. One day a young nurse came in, picked me up out of the bed, took me into a tiny bathroom, and plopped me into a bubble-filled tub. Then she took out a squishy sponge and cleaned me up good all over. I thought, holy cow, this is what we get sick for!

Another time when I was in the hospital with pneumonia or whooping cough, a nurse came in and suggested I might like to visit the lounge. She helped me put on my housecoat and walked me down to this musty old room with decrepit pee-stained couches, peeling wallpaper, dingy overhead-light fixtures groaning from the weight of dead flies and other assorted arthropods, and a gang of ancient humans who must have had the plague or worse. They were all attached to strange-looking metal contraptions. The air was alive, churning with the condensation of coughs and sneezes, liquid chunks in every decayed color of the rainbow. Every few minutes I'd hear a thud as some great-granddad would drop dead and a cloud of dust would explode out of the carpet like an A-bomb. The old biddies would all start wailing and yanking the hanging tassels that summoned the nurses into the room.

Despite all that I loved the lounge because in one corner of the cave of death was a rusty, beautiful comic-book rack; each of its compartments was stuffed with Dells, DCs, Marvels, and even the dreaded Charlton comics. I asked the nurse if I could read one. She said that I could take as many as I liked. "But I have no money," I said. "They're free—help yourself." I must have done a Tex Avery take when I heard the magic word "free." Free comic books for Chrissakes! Just because you're sick?

I'd return to my perfectly snug little hospital bed with its neatly pressed sheets, and pull out my stacks of *Timmy the Timid Ghost*, *Superman*, *Donald Duck*, *Archie*, and *Hot Stuff*. I begged to take an issue of *Archie* with Betty and Veronica into the sponge bath one day, but that turned out to be a disaster.

Through these comics, I absorbed every genre of cartoon character, marveling at the incongruity of beautiful artwork and dumb stories. I lived in this cartoon fantasy world, surrounded by the magic and illogic of comics that seemed so much more interesting than real life.

Your Hero's Dead

My inspirations.

Mike Kerr storyboard drawing
of a happy cartoonist kid
watching TV

Granny's House

In 1963, the world was still a super happy place for me. Modern, progressive—we had a space race, we believed in the future—and there were lots of cartoons on TV. My family had been back from Germany for about a year, and we had settled in Ottawa.

For a month or so we stayed at my grandparents' house, and this is where I first became really serious about learning to draw funny pictures. I would race home from school every afternoon and plop down in front of my granny's black-and-white TV set to watch cartoons. This was exciting *and* stressful because two channels ran cartoons at the same time.

Hanna-Barbera cartoons were on TV every day. At 3:30 they ran *Huckleberry Hound* on channel four and *Yogi Bear* on channel thirteen. I had to make the devil's choice. I would watch a whole Huck cartoon through, and then switch channels during the commercial to catch the tail end of a Yogi, and then switch back. At four, there was another terrible decision to make: Hanna-Barbera's *Quick Draw McGraw* or Bob Clampett's *Beany and Cecil*?

At eight years old, I didn't care as much for gags, the story, or even full animation as I did for the look of a cartoon and how much I liked the characters. I was really into the design and style of the cartoon. I thought the slightly angular look of Hanna-Barbera's cartoons was modern and futuristic. It was cool-looking and also a lot easier to draw than the classic, elaborately rounded characters like Popeye and Bugs Bunny (although I loved those cartoons too).

Coloring Books

The end of an afternoon was bittersweet, because the TV would switch to live-action, and leave me to my own devices. That's when I would get out all my comics and coloring books, and copy the drawings of Huck, Yogi, the Flintstones, Beany and Cecil, Mister Magoo—you name it! If it was a cartoon, I drew it. There was nothing worse than a coloring book with generic, realistic human characters in it. That's the kind your aunts gave you.

In one coloring book they had a page that showed how to draw Elmer Fudd using a grid. I followed the instructions using the empty grid, scratching in the lines in each appropriate square. Lo and behold, Elmer

Fudd appeared. Wow! I started drawing my own grids for other characters, and soon I could draw almost every cartoon character well enough to astound my friends. I was completely obsessed by now. Cartoons were all I thought about.

My sister Elizabeth, me and my Yogi Bear comic.
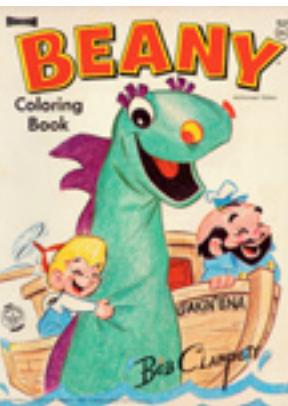
Breakfast

Every morning before school, I would eat cereal out of my Huckleberry Hound bowl, using my Quick Draw McGraw spoon, and guzzling milk from my Yogi Bear mug. (Thirty-five years later, I drew Ranger Smith eating breakfast using the same setup in "A Day in the Life of Ranger Smith.") I would only eat cereal out of boxes that had cartoon characters on them. Luckily, most of them did in the 1960s. I also collected the prizes; they weren't cheesy paper ones back then, but real plastic toys with small parts that could kill you if you swallowed them (which no one did until the soft and wimpy 1970s).

Once I was confident drawing my favorite characters, I started making up my own stories about them. I drew comics of Huck and Yogi. When I was nine, I spent the entire summer writing and illustrating the life stories of Quick Draw McGraw, Snagglepuss, Mr. Jinks, Touché Turtle, and more. (I can't believe I'm admitting this.)

Nerdy

Yes, I was a pretty nerdy kid. I wore a suit and a fedora to elementary school. I carried a briefcase and sang Frank Sinatra songs to all the girls. I was the lousiest Cub Scout. I failed all the woodsy activities like tying knots (an important part of proving your manhood, I guess) or making a "staff" from a helpless sapling that you'd wrench out of the ground, strip the bark off of, and sand and polish into a symmetrical, naked pole. Mine was gnarly, crooked, and patchy. I never won any of the badges a dad would be proud of.

Even so, I was popular because I was the troop's entertainment. At every Cub Scout meeting we had some kind of deal where we all had to sit in a circle and powwow. The Master would then ask if any one of us had any stories to tell. I always did, and mine were illustrated.

I'd trip into the middle of the circle and hold up pictures I had drawn of Yogi or some other character, and then launch into an elaborate story about him and his wacky friends. Half the time I made the stories up as I went along. I would do anything to get a laugh. I'd act it all out, making crazy faces, flinging myself all over the ground. While every other scout had a sleeve full of log-sawing and beaver-trapping badges, I had won all the creative badges. I had the artist one, the drama one, and the singing one. I was a total ham in every way, and later learned to use my tricks to protect myself from bullies.

Animation is Proof of Magic

I remember thinking that animation was proof that magic existed. I believed in science because there were rockets and the future was approaching fast, but cartoons were evidence that the world had room for witchcraft as well.

Here's how I figured it: I would stare at the cartoons every day on TV and marvel at the fact that drawings were moving, but of course it was totally obvious that drawings couldn't move. They weren't alive; they were just still pictures. I would draw my own, look down at them, and wait for them to move. I'd wish for my own magic elf to come along and give them life, but it never happened. So I deduced through sheer logic that Bill Hanna, Joe Barbera, and Walt Disney were witches, or at least had help from some demonic source. I explained this theory to all my friends, and even convinced and terrified a few of them.

One day my dad took me along to the local drugstore. In the 1960s drugstores were tiny, privately owned establishments that carried everything you'd ever want: comic books, cigarettes, dirty magazines, toys, millions of candies, model kits, everything. While Dad was looking around for whatever practical thing he needed to buy to sustain the family, I went straight for the toy rack and spotted something thrilling. It was a long, black box with windows in it showing vertical strips of cardboard imprinted with images of Hanna-Barbera characters.

Huckleberry Hound Flip Book!

Hanna-Barbera Flipbooks

Each image was slightly different from the one above and below it. The box said something like: *Huckleberry Hound and Friends! Make Your Own Flip-Book Kit!* I had no idea what this was about, except that it was a box of Hanna-Barbera characters, and I had to have it. Dad rolled his eyes and bought it for me.

As soon as we got home, I tore into the box. I pulled out a strip of *Huckleberry Hound* images. He was on skis. The first panel had him skiing along a snowbank that drops off a cliff. The middle panels had pictures of him floating on the skis in front of clouds and sky, and the last panels showed him crashing into a mountain and vibrating.

The instructions said to cut the images apart and stack them on top of each other in backward order, then to pinch the top with one hand and flip the drawings with the other. I obeyed ... and was astonished. The still drawings were moving. It wasn't magic after all. Science prevailed, and from that moment on I became a skeptic of all things preposterous, like magic, religion, and later, writing cartoons in script form. I also started making my own flip-books of absurd things.

My recreation of the first flipbook I ever saw.

A recreation of my character Jarzan, drawn forty years later.

Creating My Own Characters

When I was nine or ten, I cautiously started creating my own characters. My first "star" was a character named Jarzan, a guy made out of stacks of jars. Somehow he didn't look as much like a real character to me, not like the characters I watched on TV and in the movies.

I had started to analyze the styles of the different studios, using my comic and coloring books, and made style guides that showed the MGM style compared to the Warner Bros. style compared to Disney compared to Hanna-Barbera and so on. At the time, the differences I spotted were easy-to-recognize superficial traits, like that MGM and Warner Bros. characters were round, Hanna-Barbera characters were square, and 1960s Disney characters were an intricate combination of the two. I decided that I needed my own easy-to-recognize style.

I created a character named Nosey Hotface who was a mishmash of other characters. He had George Jetson's head structure with Fred Flintstone's nose, crosshatched in *Pogo* creator Walt Kelly's style. Nosey's head sat atop a bland, Archie-like semi-realistic body. However, it still wasn't enough for me to call it *my* style. Then one

day, I was drawing the bag under Nosey Hotface's eye (like Hanna-Barbera characters, who must have all been sleepy), and eureka! It came to me. Instead of drawing it curved like Hanna-Barbera characters, I drew square bags. Square eye-bags became the secret to my eleven-year-old style.

Nosey was my second big "star" after Jarzan. I had so much confidence in this guy that I even pitched a movie with him to Walt Disney when I was eleven. Actually, what I did was come up with a story called "Nosey Hotface in Africa," which had proven popular at
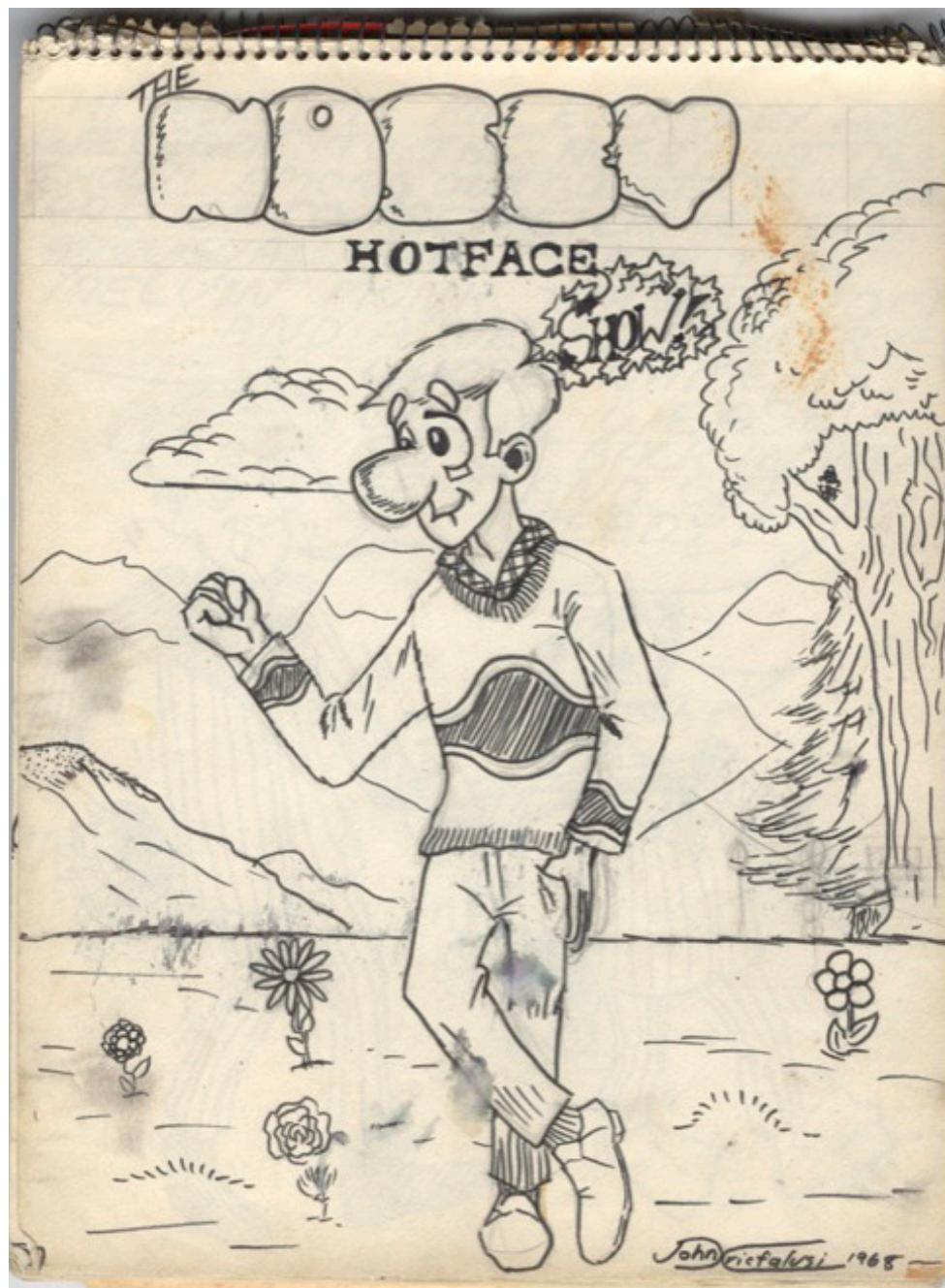
Cub Scout meetings and included a bunch of drawings of him being chased by cannibals, and mailed them to "Walt Disney, Hollywood." I wrote my hero a letter, too, which gave him my best character outright. I told Walt it was OK for him to go ahead and make the movie, and he wouldn't owe me anything. It was my gift to him for bringing me so much joy every fifth Sunday night on *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. (It was only every fifth episode that they would show cartoons. The other four episodes would be torturous live-action shows like *Toby Tyler*. Depressing stories about little boys being beaten by evil circus grown-ups that made you wanna kill yourself.)

A gag from the Nosey Hotface Show.

This impersonation gag was stolen directly out of a Snoopy series of gags.

John Diefenbaker was one of the Canadian Prime Ministers when I was a kid.
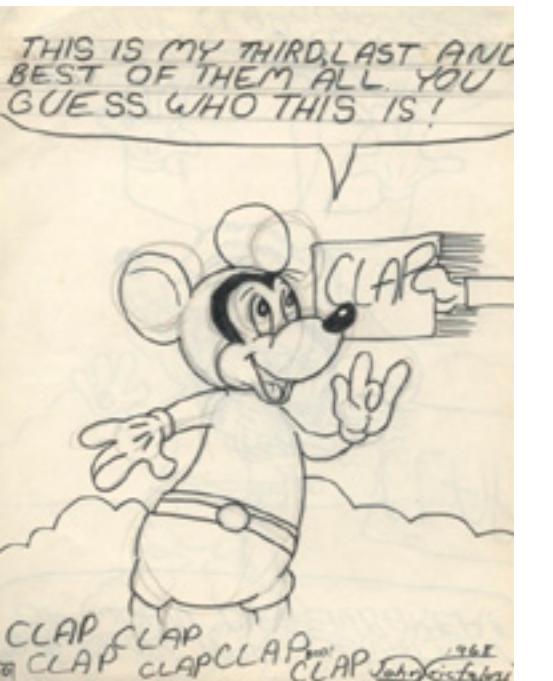
This impersonation was an easy (dumb) guess.

"Og and Pug" – a couple of caveman characters stolen from Johnny Hart's "B.C."

Letter From Walt

About a month went by with me checking the mail every day, and my dad telling me I was living in a "dream world" if I thought I'd ever get a letter back from Walt Disney. Then one day I walked in the door and my mom was sitting on the chesterfield (that's "couch" in Canadian) looking at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "A letter came for you today," she teased. I yanked it out of her hand and stared bug-eyed at the letterhead. In the upper left-hand corner was a two-color drawing of Mickey Mouse with "Walt Disney Productions" printed underneath.

I tore it open and there were all my "Nosey Hotface in Africa" drawings returned to me with a letter, not from Walt himself, but from a secretary. It wasn't a form letter. Someone actually took the time to answer me directly. The letter said something like: "Mr. Disney was very flattered by your cartoons and offer, but is busily working on another movie at the moment. Please come back in a few years when you're grown up and bring more drawings. We hope to have work for you then."

One day, not too long after the "letter from Walt," I came home from school in my suit, walked in the front door whistling a Sinatra tune, tossed my fedora in the closet, dropped my Secret Sam briefcase on the floor, adjusted my bowtie, and was about to race upstairs to my room to read some comic books when I stopped and saw something ominous.

My dad was sitting at the kitchen table down the hall reading the newspaper. All I could see was his broad muscular back and his head hunched low. He heard me come in and slowly … *slowly* … turned around and beckoned me to come see him.

When I got close, he shoved the front page of the paper in my face and blurted, "*your hero's dead*! Do you know what *dead* is? It means he's gone forever! He kicked the bucket! Croaked!"

There, sure enough, in a huge headline, it said, WALT DISNEY, CREATOR OF MAGICAL WORLDS—DEAD AT 66! My dad continued his lesson, his bulging eyes peering above the headline. "See that? He's not a *God*.

He's just like you, me, your mother—everyone! We're all gonna join your buddy some day. In the *dirt*. That's *life*! Maybe now you'll grow up and start getting serious. Maybe now you'll put away your little comic books and funny pictures and face real life. You're *eleven years old*! It's time to start planning for your future!"

I dragged myself up the stairs in slow motion with my dad's bellowing fading into the distance, sat on my bed, picked up a well-worn *Super Goof*, opened it, and stared over the top of it for a couple hours.

Becoming Mod

The Beatles had ushered in a new style of music and dress code in 1964, but I avoided it for a while. By 1966 I was hooked on being mod and cool, and exchanged my Frank Sinatra suit and greasy short hair for tight pants, pointy shoes covered with chains and zippers, and a short mop-top—which my dad hated.

My transition from decent republican baby to dirty hippie.

No one despised the Beatles more than Dad but I loved this new type of rock music and was especially influenced by the Beatles' brand of likeable—yet boundless—creativity and energy. I bought all their records at yard sales and scratched the crap out of them playing them over and over. I memorized every line and every nuance. I even analyzed the structure of their songs, not knowing anything about music, and recognized that their songs have lots of surprising variations on verses and choruses. This influences my cartoon story structure to this day in the way I set up viewers' expectations and surprise them by doing the opposite.

I had about two years of coolness where I was totally in synch with the mainstream of pop culture, and expected it to last forever. However, around 1968 or so, I started getting jaded. I finally noticed that Saturday-morning cartoons were getting crappier, less cartoony, and less fun, which made no sense to me. Filmation had cartoons on TV that literally made me sick to my stomach. Then Hanna-Barbera started imitating them with *Scooby-Doo*. I couldn't believe it. They abandoned their iconic style of design, created by Ed Benedict, which had made them so recognizable and fun. I actually stopped watching Saturday-morning cartoons all together, because they weren't cartoons anymore; they had become these badly scrawled "realistic" things that didn't seem so magical anymore.

Around the same time, I began noticing that pop culture in general was turning bland and lifeless. On a trip to Paul's Sundries, my favorite drugstore where I went twice a week to buy new comics, the jukebox played a new pop tune called "Dizzy" by Tommy Roe. It was the dullest song I had ever heard—no energy, no feeling, and moronic lyrics. I thought it was a song for old ladies or something, but no, it was aimed at the same kids who loved the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and all the dynamic, exciting rock 'n' roll that had revolutionized the sixties.

With unbelievable speed, this wimpy music spread like a virus until it wiped out rock music or anything with a bold, confident sound from the charts. The 1970s arrived and almost all mainstream music became bland. This was the musical equivalent of the deterioration of Saturday-morning cartoons. It sounded like Archie's music to me. If I wanted to hear real rock music, I had to either listen to older records, or listen to the less popular underground bands like Johnny & Edgar Winter, Frank Zappa, Blodwyn Pig, and other obscure groups who still made exciting music.

Heron Park, Italians, Pointy Shoes, That Man

My years in Ottawa affected my view of life. When I was nine years old my family had settled in a not very affluent neighborhood called Heron Park. There were three schools all within a block of one another—a public school where pale, white Protestant kids like me went; a Catholic school where the English-speaking immigrant kids (mostly Italians) went; and a French school for the French-speaking kids. The Catholic kids were generally tougher than the public school kids. They grew up faster; when they were twelve, they already had mustaches and five o'clock shadows, and they looked like adults to us. They also had gangs that would go around beating up other kids. I quickly realized I should befriend the toughest, biggest Catholic kid, so I hung around with a guy named "Beaver" who was huge and fat. He had sideburns and rode a kids' Mustang bike. I gave him my cowboy hat and told him lots of jokes, and he kept me from getting my butt kicked by the other toughs. My public school pals used to ask me, "Who is that *man* you hang around with?"

The scariest gangs were the Italian ones. All the Italians wore pointy shoes, which they hated, and I'm sure made them extra ornery. They had names like Virgilio, Luigi, Domenic, Manuel, and Mario, and a lot of them had thick Italian accents. Some of them I made friends with, but others were too mean to even go near. The last thing you wanted was to be kicked with those pointy shoes. Decades later I made a Flash cartoon for the Cartoon Network web site called *Boo Boo and the Man*. It featured Boo Boo as a naive public school kid who was being picked on by Italian bears with pointy shoes who thought it was weird that Boo Boo hung around with a full-grown "man"—the man being Yogi.

High School Rock Bands

One of the Catholic kids, Karl Reznick, a fellow Ukrainian, became one of my best buddies in high school. He had a guitar and could play it. He'd come over and play and sing, and I'd sing along with him. We'd make recordings on my cassette player that we thought were genius. He showed me how to play some chords, and then I bought a used guitar from another friend, Gary Bazdell, who had switched to playing drums.

It was kind of cool to be morose and jaded in the 1970s when everyone else was bland and following the mainstream trends. Karl and I kept starting bands, quitting them, and then starting more. I had lost some interest in cartoons as a teenager, and was sure I would be part of the next Beatles one day. I still drew

obsessively, but not with much purpose. I drew dirty stories of *The Flintstones* that all the school's football players loved. I called them Cave-Nudes, and showed them off at parties to the big hulking brutes who were dancing to disco with all the hottest chicks.

I also drew posters for our various bands. At different times we were "The Freds," "The Flintstone Bros.," and "Underwhere?," among others. We played at some high school dances and parks, but never attained the success of the Beatles that we dreamed of. Band members came and went. One of my best friends, Mike MacDonald, who played drums with us for a while, was a hilarious guy, and became Canada's greatest comedian in the 1980s. Later on we worked together and he even did voices for me, including Rip in *The Ripping Friends*.

The band.

My friend Simon Blake putting up with my noisy "Yeah, yeah, yeah" music.

Adolescent art, early 1970s.

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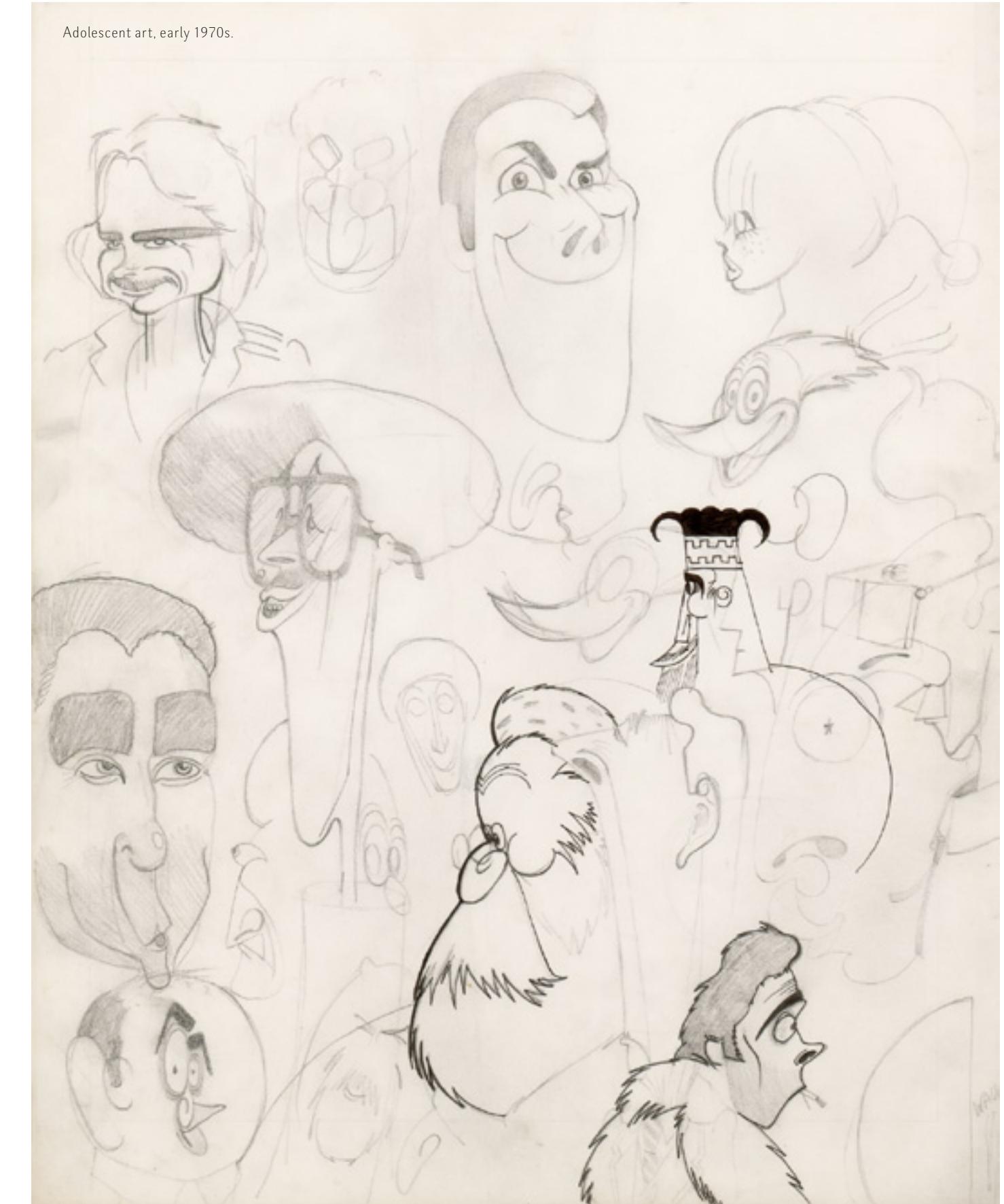
College-age artwork.
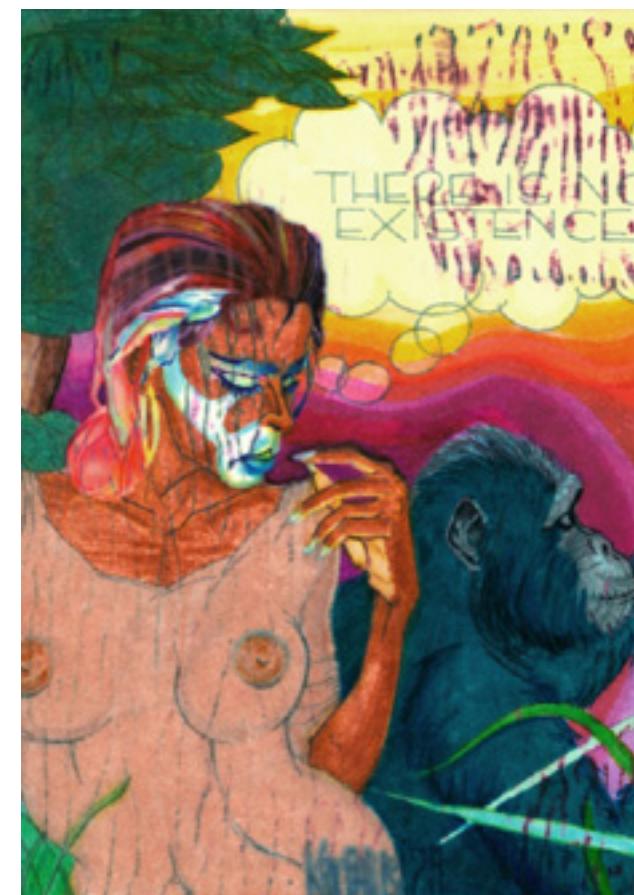
Meeting The King of Cartoons

Sheridan College

After high school, my mom and dad tried their best to get me a "real job" working as a clerk in various types of government offices. Half the people in Ottawa work for "the government," doing fake, make-work jobs. I was no good at any of them. I eventually decided to apply for the animation program at Sheridan College, located in the Toronto suburbs, but somehow ended up in the cartooning program, which was a separate course that had nothing to do with animation. About halfway through the first year, as I was wondering when we'd start to animate, fellow student Rick Lyons came running into class and said, "John, I know why we aren't animating. The animation class is on the other side of the campus!" I walked over with him and saw all these students flipping paper on their animation discs and realized I had been tricked. Rick and a couple other students had fallen for this trap too.

Around that same time I met Danny Antonucci (who went on to create the animated television series *Ed, Edd n Eddy*) at a party, and he told me how great it was to animate. The following year I quit the cartooning program and enrolled in the animation course, the program I had wanted in the first place.

My animation homework.

The Tex Avery Book

While taking the animation course at Sheridan, I discovered Joe Adamson's book *Tex Avery: King of Cartoons*. At the time I had never heard of Tex Avery and had never even seen an MGM cartoon growing up. I was aware of the MGM characters Droopy and Tom and Jerry through comic books, but for some reason, they didn't show the cartoons on Ottawa television in the 1960s.

I was a bit outraged about this guy being proclaimed "King of Cartoons" when I was sure that Chuck Jones (whose cartoons I'd watched on *The Bugs Bunny Show* as a teenager) was the king, but I picked it up anyway and flipped through it.

The pictures inside wowed me. A wolf with his head coming through a lamp, sexy girls, the same wolf doing a giant "take." I bought the book, and even though I still hadn't seen a Tex Avery MGM cartoon, I was convinced by the black-and-white film stills alone that sure enough, this guy *must* be the king.

Shortly after, I started seeing fliers posted on telephone poles and fences all over Toronto advertising cartoon screenings at a local college hosted by film collector Reg Hartt. I went and finally saw my first Tex Avery cartoon. I think it was *King-Size Canary*. It was so funny and outrageous that Tex instantly became my hero.

Hartt's shows were a mixture of animated shorts from all the classic studios, and I got a real education at his screenings. I saw Betty Boop cartoons for the first time, Popeyes that I hadn't seen since I was a kid, *Terrytoons*, Columbia's Screen Gems, and the familiar Disney and Warner Bros. cartoons. The Tex Avery cartoons were always my favorites. I would also show up at my classmate Bob Jaques's 16mm cartoon parties. He introduced me to the individual styles of animators like Rod Scribner and Jim Tyer.

I was disappointed by my first exposure to Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera's Tom and Jerry cartoons. I had always liked the designs of the characters in the comics, and I had read about how lush and elaborate they were in animation form, but when I finally saw Tom and Jerry on the screen, I didn't find them funny. The cartoons had slapstick, beautiful animation, and sophisticated execution all around, but felt monotonous to me.
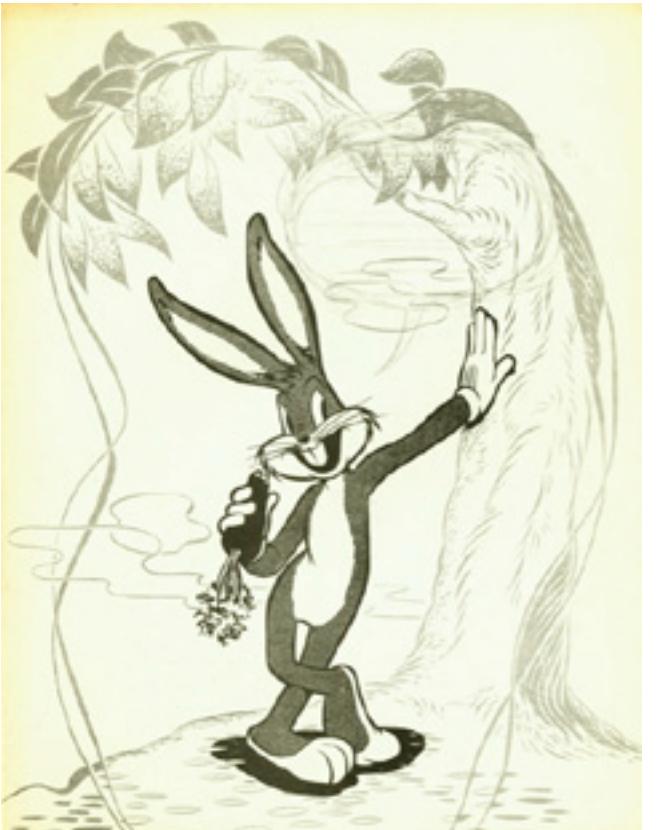
Discovering Clampett Cartoons

One week Hartt ran a cartoon by a director whose name looked familiar. When the opening credits came on for *The Great Piggy Bank Robbery*, I saw Bob Clampett had directed it. "Wasn't that the guy who made *Beany and Cecil*?" I thought. This cartoon seemed different than anything I had seen before, right from the first frame of the credits; I think maybe because it had *feeling*. I was accustomed to cartoons making me laugh or impressing me with the artwork, but this cartoon somehow felt ominous.

When Daffy started pacing back and forth in front of the mailbox, I was on the edge of my seat. I was anxious and felt for Daffy, like he was waiting for something really important, something earthshaking. I couldn't believe the drawings, either, because Daffy looked so different. He was angular, and his poses were much more severe than anything I was used to. The combination of these super-graphic drawings, tense animation, music, and backgrounds created a foreboding atmosphere, which I'd felt before in some Disney films, but not so much in humor cartoons. The animation pulled me into the film with Daffy, and I experienced his emotions *with* him, rather than just sitting back and laughing *at* the wacky cartoon characters. *The Great Piggy Bank Robbery* blew me away. I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever seen and told everyone I knew about it.

My caricature of Bob Clampett with a Clampett-style Bugs Bunny.
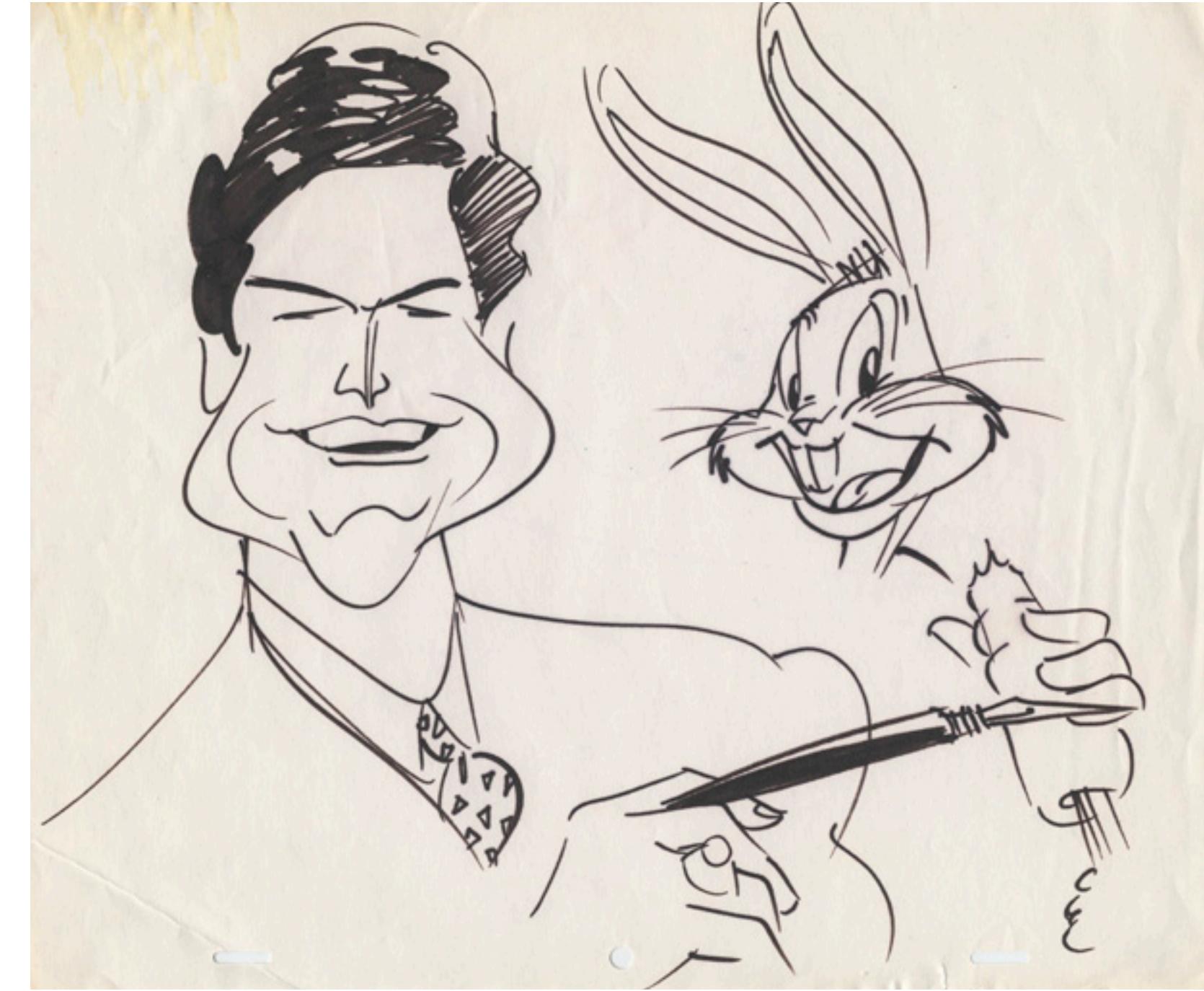
The next week at Hartt's show I saw Clampett's *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* for the first time and was stunned all over again. Now I knew that *The Great Piggy Bank Robbery* wasn't a fluke, and that there was something magic about this Clampett guy. Avery had been dethroned after just two Clampett cartoons.

As I saw more Clampett cartoons, I concluded that he was the primary force behind *Looney Tunes*. He was caricaturing cartoons themselves. I was outraged that hardly anyone knew who Bob Clampett was or had given him any credit. All the other *Looney Tunes* that I loved as a kid now looked like pale, toned-down imitations of Clampett's films. His cartoons showed me how far you can push the medium, and made me realize that the creative possibilities were limitless.

Trip to LA

In early 1979, Rick Lyons, Bob Jaques, and I decided to visit Hollywood. I had grown tired of Sheridan College and wanted to show my portfolio to the studios in Los Angeles. I also got Bob Clampett's phone number from Bill Matthews, one of the teachers at Sheridan, and was eager for the chance to meet him.

After we landed in Los Angeles, I kept hounding Rick and Bob to stop at a phone booth. I nervously dialed Bob Clampett's number and was greeted by a really deep, suave voice on the other end, "Helloooo?" "Is this the *genius*?" I asked. The voice started laughing and said, "Well, this is Bob ... " Before he could get in another word, I blurted out, "You're the greatest cartoonist who ever lived!"

He laughed some more, and I launched into why I liked his cartoons so much, analyzing them for him. Bob was flattered and, I think, kind of surprised that someone was so obsessed with his work, because at the time he was largely forgotten. Chuck Jones was getting all the glory in the press and enjoying the resurgence of interest in the Warner Bros. cartoons.

Bob invited me to meet him the following Tuesday at his office and said he would show me around and tell me lots of stories about the old days—back when it was fun to make cartoons. I hung up trembling.

The following week I showed up promptly at his Seward Street office in Hollywood, where he had made the *Beany and Cecil* cartoons in the 1960s, and his pretty wife, Sody, was waiting for me. She introduced herself, and then said that Bob had the flu and was too sick to show up. She invited me in and offered to give me a tour of the studio, and said that Bob would call and speak with me for as long as I wanted.

His office wasn't as big as I had imagined, but it had cartoon memorabilia all over the walls and on the shelves. The first thing that caught my eye was his desk and empty chair. I looked up at Sody and said, "Is that where the genius sits?" She laughed and said yes. I stared at the chair and imagined Bob thinking up all of his most creative wild cartoon ideas, and then asked Sody if she would let me sit in it and absorb some genius genes that might have rubbed off of his anatomy. She said I could sit there while speaking to Bob on the phone.

I carefully lowered my posterior onto his soft chair ... and farted, figuring that he had probably farted there a million times, maybe while coming up with his best jokes. I thought that mixing my farts with his would somehow stimulate my own creativity. Bob phoned, and I spoke with him for at least an hour. He was totally affable, and enthused about every aspect of cartooning. He told me tons of stories about working at Warner Bros. with Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Bob McKimson, Rod Scribner, and all the rest. He spoke highly of all of them and gave them all credit for their contributions to the studio style. He also told me stories about all the practical jokes they pulled at the studio, and
how they would get risqué material past the producer Leon Schlesinger.

We became instant friends even though we hadn't met. I was sad when the call was over, but then Sody showed me their main room in the studio—the playroom/den. It was full of even more cartoon toys and great pictures on the walls. After I moved to LA, I learned that this was the room Bob liked to have parties in, and I met lots of famous cartoonists and film directors there, including Grim Natwick, Jack Kirby, Frank Thomas, Rudy Ising, Hugh Harman, and many more. I remember thinking, Wow, if all these people like Bob, why isn't he written up more in the books about animation? One evening I was talking to a famous film critic at Bob's party, and he told me Bob was his favorite animation director of all time, so I asked why he didn't write that in his books. He leaned close in and whispered, "Because Chuck Jones would kill me." Throughout the years, a lot of people told me the same thing.

I spent the rest of the trip showing my portfolio around the various studios. It was filled with gag drawings and cartoony stuff, and almost everywhere I went, I got the same response. "We don't do that kind of stuff anymore, kid." It was disappointing. No one had an explanation for *why* "we don't do that anymore." I guessed that cartoons just weren't supposed to be entertaining anymore, and that was that.

One thrill (at least at first) was visiting Hanna-Barbera. The building was beautiful, and the lobby walls were covered in original paintings from Little Golden Books that I had read and collected since I was a kid. Now this looked like a fun place to work. I couldn't wait to show my portfolio.

Harry Love, an old-time special effects animator, was now the guy at Hanna-Barbera who reviewed artists' work. He looked at my portfolio, which was admittedly a mess, and started flinging the drawings all over the office one by one. He didn't comment on the quality of any of them; he just kept grumbling about how shitty my presentation was. He told me I should mat all my drawings so they would be presentable, and then come back someday when I had my portfolio better organized.

All of these responses from the studios shouldn't have surprised me, yet they did. I knew that cartoons by the 1970s had become bland and boring, but I figured there must be some logical reason for it. Maybe there weren't a lot of funny people left in Hollywood. I had naively imagined that once they saw the funny drawings in my portfolio, they would be thrilled and say, "At last! Someone who can save our studio and make it fun again!"

Later, I talked to many other young cartoonists and they all had the same expectations and disappointing experiences. We learned the hard way that new cartoons were *supposed* to be lousy and there was no logical reason for it.

There was one studio where I got a positive response. It was a small place in Northridge called Calico Creations, run by Tom and Claudia Burton. They had worked for the big studios, didn't enjoy it, and had broken away to form their own mom-and-pop studio where they did station IDs and commercials. Tom loved my wacky drawings, and introduced me to the other artists working at his studio. Everyone was extremely friendly, unlike the chilly receptions I'd gotten at the bigger studios. Tom said if anything came up and he needed more people, he would give me a shout.

It was pretty depressing to go back to Sheridan after being in Hollywood and talking to Clampett. I was not a good student and I found the curriculum boring. The teachers all preached Disney, Disney, Disney, and turned down their noses at funny cartoons like Clampett's and Avery's. The irony was that none of the teachers could draw anything remotely as skilled as the Disney style. They didn't really teach. Instead, they handed out assignments and expected you to figure out how to do a walk cycle, or Goofy carrying a heavy bucket filled with water. I was totally unfocused and needed more direct, hands-on training.

About a month after I returned, Tom Burton called me with a job offer. I dropped out of Sheridan, packed up my belongings, and headed to Hollywood.

In college, I came up with a super hero character—Mildman, Friend of the Crippled and Blind. Mildman was the world's most powerful homosexual. One of his archenemies was Fetus-Man, a tiny fetus in a super-villain suit attached by a long umbilical cord that propelled him into and snapped him out of scenes, 1984.
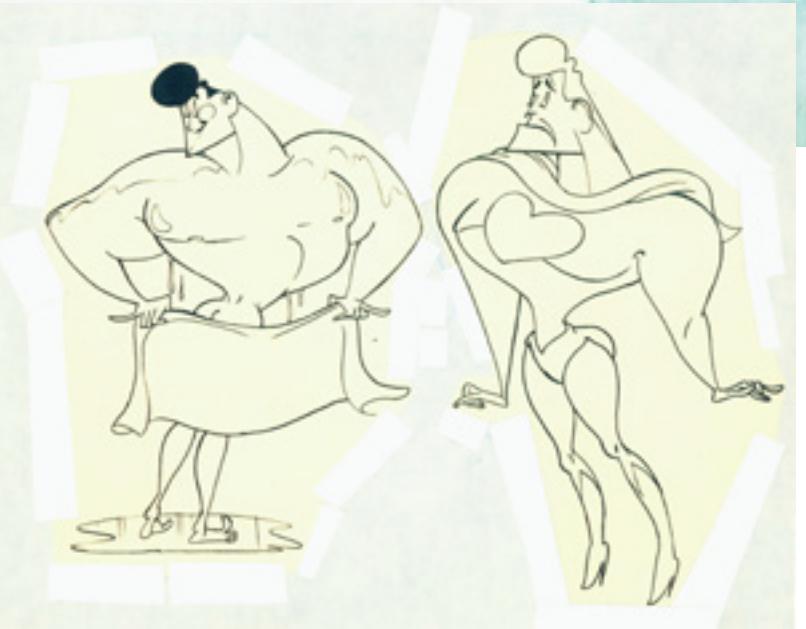
Mildman, Billy Bunting, Brik Blastoff, Ren and Stimpy

Developing My Own Characters

I don't know what I was thinking when I was in my early twenties. In the late seventies I was creating characters and stories that my college buddies and I thought were funny, and somehow I figured that meant I could sell these ideas to a TV network.

Later, while working at Calico, I continued creating characters on the side. I came up with Billy Bunting of the Apes, a little bird who was raised by apes. He had a beautiful girlfriend whose breasts kept sneaking out of her animal-skin top, early 1980s.
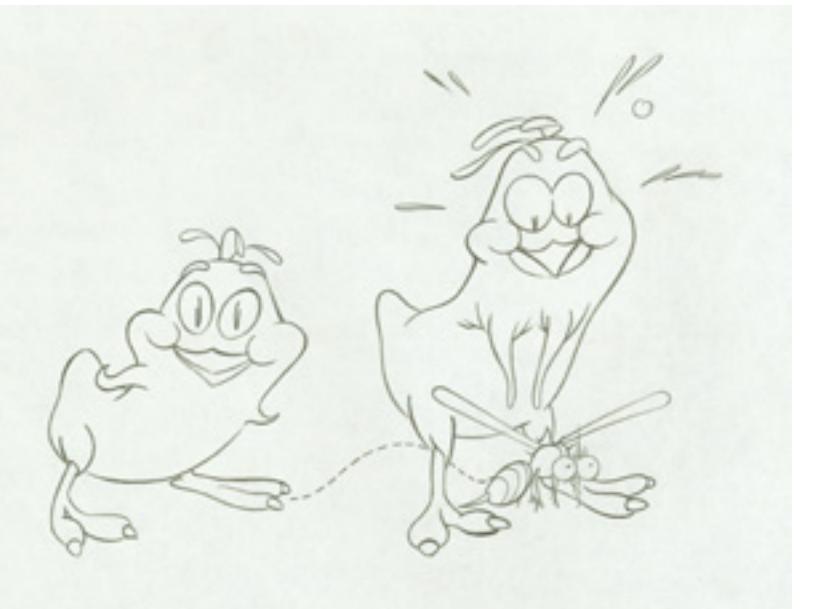
Billy Bunting presentation
panorama, early 1980s.

Brik and Jimmy

Another character idea was a science fiction hero who I called Brik Blastoff of the Outback. He was a highly stylized, angular, heroic guy who never unclenched his teeth, even when eating or speaking. He was the universe's most manly man.

I supplemented my income with caricature gigs at parties and events, and at these jobs I found constant inspiration for new characters. One time when I was doing caricatures at the racetrack I saw a man who had the funniest head ever. His face had baby features, with huge glassy saucer-eyes, a blond crew cut, and a huge chin. I was supposed to be drawing the paying customer who was sitting in front of me, but stopped to sketch this baby-man freak. This was the embryo for Jimi (named after *Superman's* Jimmy Olsen), the teenaged sidekick for Brik Blastoff, and that design later morphed into Jimmy, the Idiot Boy, who I initially teamed up with Mildman. My friend Felix Forte and I actually wrote a treatment for a Mildman feature film. I'm not sure who I expected would buy an animated feature in 1980 starring a homosexual super hero, who, with his retarded sidekick/lover, battled a dastardly fetus. All I can say is that I truly believed in all of this stuff at the time.
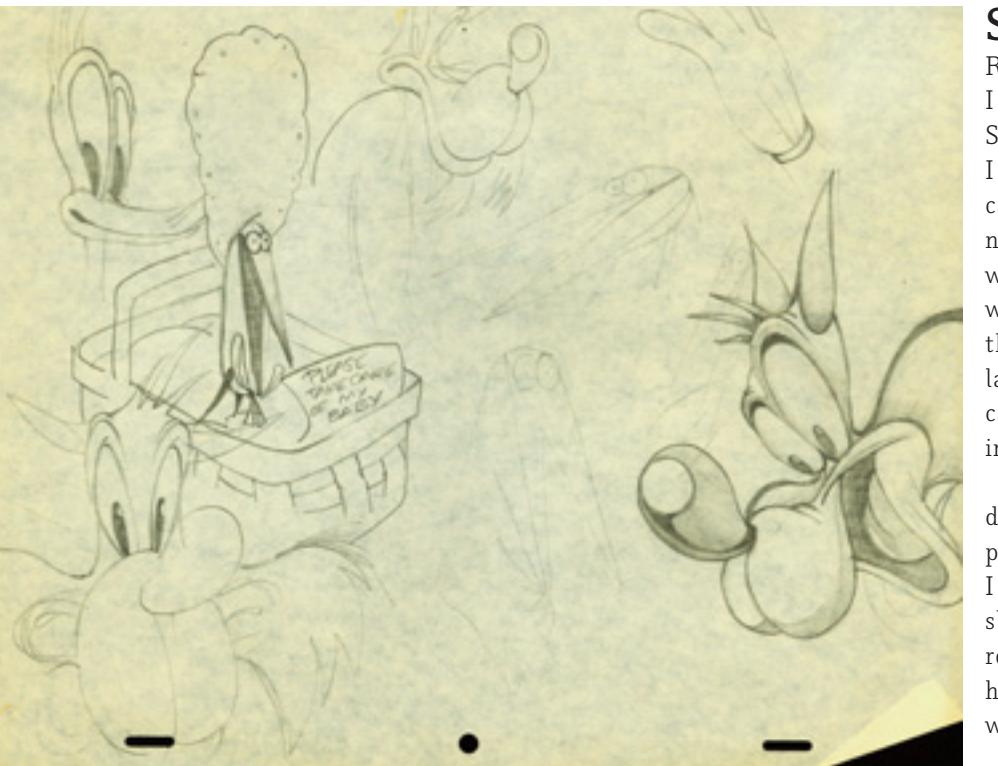
Collaborating with Friends: Lynne Naylor

I constantly bounced ideas off my friends and colleagues, and many of them contributed gags and ideas, but my main collaborator was Lynne Naylor, a fantastic cartoonist. She drew presentation art with me for many of these early pitches, designed character model sheets, and even helped type up the stories for the story bibles. Lynne can do almost anything artistic. She draws, paints, animates, designs characters, and does layouts and storyboards. Her style influenced mine as much as mine influenced hers. She is a true all-star cartoonist and helped usher in the return of cartoony cartoons.


Lynne Naylor with Bob Clampett and Milt Gray

Stimpy's Birth

Ren and Stimpy were also born around this time, and I began developing a group of characters around them. Stimpy started as a doodle I created while on the phone. I was obsessed with the mid-forties Bob Clampett cartoon *A Gruesome Twosome* that starred a demon-like, naked Tweety Bird, and two cats trying to catch him to win the heart of a cute cartoon pussycat. The animation was total 1940s quality at its peak, but the design of the cats seemed to be a throwback or homage to the late-thirties bulb-nosed Warner Bros. drawing style, a cartoonier sensibility that most studios had abandoned in favor of copying Disney.

I loved these cats and used to absentmindedly doodle my own bulb-nosed cats while talking on the phone. A sort of retarded character began to emerge. I gave him evil slit-eyes that peeked through holes sliced through the skin of his eyelid mask. I posed him in retarded walks with scrawny little arms dangling behind him. It wasn't meant to be a genuine character at all; it was just one of my many phone doodle characters.

Ren

Ren had a different and separate birth. One day someone brought a postcard into Calico with a funny-looking psychotic Chihuahua in a cute fluffy sweater standing next to a woman's legs. I already thought Chihuahuas were funny. I remember being in a parking lot and walking by a noisy truck. The window was slightly rolled down to let what looked like tiny dog fetuses snarl, slaver, and scream at me. These guys wanted my throat. This was hilarious to me; little frail creatures who had so much hate and wrath in them that they would challenge animals fifty times their own weight to a fight.

So when I saw the picture of one of these hideous bug-eyed monsters in a fluffy sweater, the incongruity of it inspired me to draw it. And I kept drawing him, making him sicker inside all the time. We used to do a Peter Lorre imitation for the character, as he calmly threatened to tear your jugular out if you didn't take the *fe-e-e-lthy* sweater off him. He started to take on a life of his own as I drew gag drawings of him in little story fragments. His female master would dress him up in the fruitiest of sweaters and shove him out the door to go hang out with the other neighborhood pets. The other animals would make fun of him for being a sissy, and he would explode in rage. He was so small though that every other pet could beat the crap out of him. Even the neighborhood budgerigar bullied him.

The embryonic duo of Ren and Stimpy.
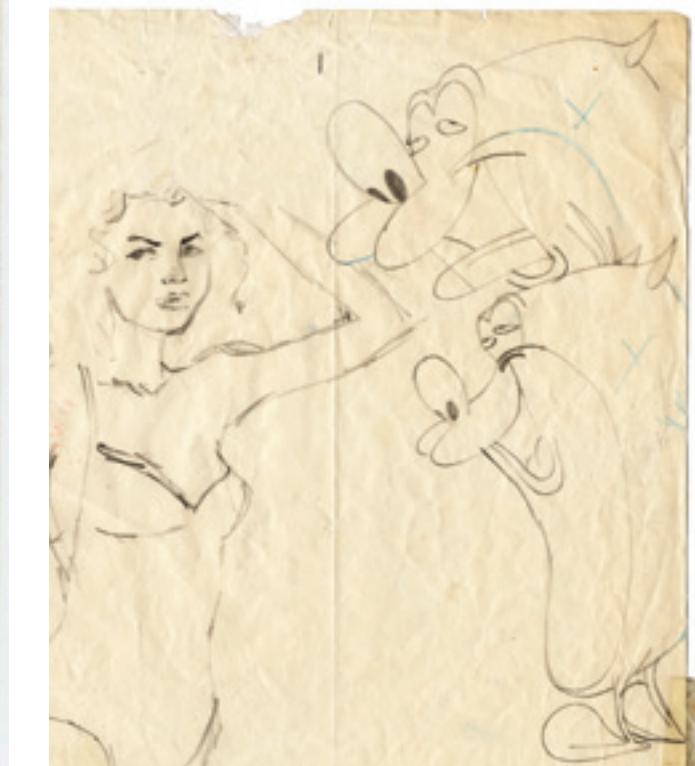
Ren and Stimpy Team Up

Joel Fajnor, a fellow animator at Calico, and I used to make up scenes about these characters and laugh, and one day he saw me doodling. "Hey, why don't you team up that Chihuahua with your retarded cat?" Joel asked. So I did. I named the cat "Stimpy" because he looked like a Stimpy to me. (Stimpy had been a nickname for one of my college roommates. Ren Hoek was the name of my apartment manager.)

The relationship between them originally was this: Ren hates everyone and wants to kill them and steal their women—every species, but he favors human women most of all. But he's so weak and frail that he can't kill anyone and the other animals always want to beat him pulpy. They can't though because Ren has a big protector—Stimpy, the nerveless cat. Stimpy doesn't feel pain because he has only one nerve ending and it doesn't work that well anyway. This is great for Ren, because he has at least one person he can abuse. Ren takes out all his rage on Stimpy, slapping and biting him whenever he is frustrated.

Stimpy is so primitive and senseless that you have to strike him really hard before he will feel anything. I would draw a cross section of Stimpy that showed Ren's smack impulse slowly traveling up Stimpy's one nerve till it finally reached his brain. Little electrical impulses would then go off and Stimpy would be in ecstasy. Any kind of feeling at all makes Stimpy experience short bursts of awareness, and he hugs Ren almost to death in gratitude. That was basically it.

Gomez, Forte, Bobby Bigloaf, and Donny Chickenchild

This combination of characters spawned a million story ideas and I started writing them up. Over the next few years, I knocked around ideas with everyone I knew, including my friends Felix Forte, Jim Gomez, Eddie Fitzgerald, Tom Minton, and others, and then I would write up the stories and do sketches. With more stories came more characters. The cast developed into Donny Chickenchild, a tough little boy who was Ren's master; Donny's stepdad, a right-wing nut named George Liquor; and Donny's nerdy fat friend named Bobby Bigloaf (Jim Gomez came up with the name Bigloaf seemingly out of nowhere). There was also a genius kid in Donny's class named Brainchild. It went on and on.

Ren and Stimpy Presentation Art

Lynne Naylor and I made a visual presentation for a *Ren & Stimpy* show in the early 1980s, which was incredibly naive of us. I actually thought I could show this to TV network executives, and sell it to them as a Saturday-morning series. At that time I didn't know any executives and it would be a few years before I actually pitched it to anyone with any power. But I kept adding to the world of Ren and Stimpy all along.

I had a good job at Calico. The bosses liked me and taught me every aspect of animation production; each artist had the opportunity to try their hand at different jobs. It wasn't an assembly line like the other studios, and it was a great way to learn how everything fit together. The only complaint I had was that nothing we ever did was cartoony. We were doing cheesy seventies and early-eighties animation styles—wiggly ripoffs of R. O. Blechman and wiggly rotoscoping. It depressed me that nothing we made was fun for an audience to look at or fun for us to animate.

It seemed to me that fun cartoon animation was completely dead, and I couldn't understand why. In the meantime, Bob Clampett had introduced me to this guy, Milt Gray, who was teaching animation night classes at Filmation, which I considered to be the worst animation studio in history. Bob assured me that

Milt was a big fan of his work and loved classic cartoons as much as I did. So I called Milt and we hit it off in our first conversation.

I spoke to Milt many times over the phone, but was surprised when I met him. The first time I showed up at one of his classes, I saw this giant, lanky guy standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by young cartoonists, and he was swiveling his hips in a wide circle, explaining that all movement starts from that point in the body.

I was eager for the class and expected that he was going to show us how to draw funny *cartoon* animation. Instead he was using "realistic" Filmation characters from *Flash Gordon* to illustrate how action worked. But what *action* was there in Filmation cartoons? I lost interest in the class within the first minute of the demonstration. While I sat through the ultra-serious lesson, I kept hearing a zany, high-pitched laugh—like there was something funny going on. It was the most unique laugh I had ever heard.

Bob Camplett giving Milt Gray the Coal Black Award, based on his infamous 1943 cartoon, "Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs".

Meeting Eddie

After the class, Milt grabbed me and said, "I want to introduce you to someone. He's a soulmate!" I looked up and there was that laugh coming out of a head that was the ultimate stereotype of what you'd expect a cartoonist to look like. A skinny guy wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, with buckteeth, glasses taped together, a thick head of black hair cut in a 1950s style, and big ears. This was Eddie Fitzgerald. He shook my hand and said, "Milt says you're another CLAMPETT FAN! Har, har, har!" I had brought my portfolio with me and was dying to show it to them. Eddie was very eager, as he is about everything.

I whipped it out, this mess of crazy drawings of powerful homosexuals, psychotic Chihuahuas, retarded cats, sexy girls, dirty jokes, and the like. The complete opposite of anything you saw on the walls of Filmation. Eddie went crazy. His laughs grew progressively louder as he flipped through each page. "*Har, har har!*" He kept looking up at Milt and saying, "Wow, funny drawings! A guy that can draw *funny*!"

Then Eddie proceeded to tell me about "The Golden Age of Filmation." He said that the studio was experiencing a revolution. They were letting the cartoonists come up with gags, and everyone was having a blast, and that I had to quit my job and come there to help save cartoons.

Eddie took me into the office he shared with a crusty veteran animation director named Paul Fennell.

Eddie's half of the office was decorated with his collection of wacky items: giant eyeballs, witches' heads, batwings, brains, Ubangi masks either hung from the ceiling or cluttered in a pile on his desk. It screamed zaniness. Fennell's half of the office was clean, neat, austere, and boring. This should have been a warning.

I was swept away with Eddie's eagerness, but couldn't bring myself to believe that Filmation would ever create anything fun. Eddie showed me some storyboards he was working on for "Quacula," a segment of *The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse*. They were hilarious and wildly cartoony.

Eddie's enthusiasm was infectious, and I was torn. Should I continue working at Calico with supportive, friendly people on boring and bland commercials, or should I join this cold, corporate monster and contribute to a new Golden Age of cartoony cartoons?

Eddie's office mate, Paul Fennell.

Eddie Fitzgerald in his Filmation office
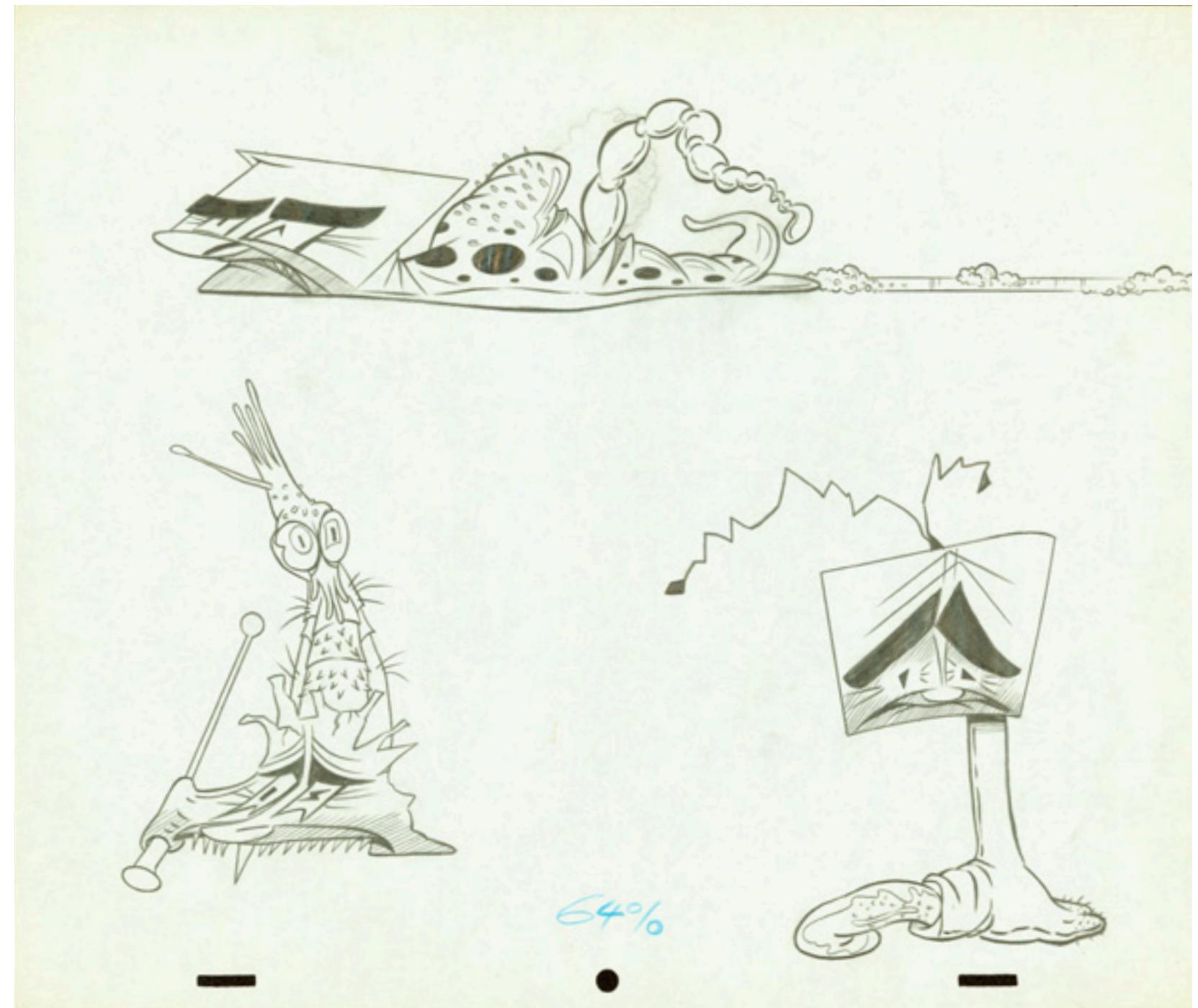
One of the funny drawings I showed to Eddie and Milt at the evening Filmation class.

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Brik Blastoff presentation art.

The Golden Age of Filmation

I did it. I quit working for Calico in 1979 and jumped over to Filmation to become a storyboard artist on *The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse* and *Heckle and Jeckle*. I had never done a complete official storyboard before, so it was daunting. The other thing that shocked me was the storyboard format that Filmation used. (Storyboards are the panels of sketches that outline the action and dialogue in an animated cartoon, kind of like a comic book.) They printed nine postage stamp–sized frames on each piece of 8 1/2" x 11" paper, and expected the artists to draw characters accurately and with backgrounds on these microscopic panels. I have never been able to draw small, let alone at the subatomic level. They must have thought they were saving money on paper; Filmation was all about saving every possible penny, in the craziest ways.

A sort of experimental revolution *was* going on at the studio, and I don't know how it started. All the storyboard artists were in one wing of the building, and most of us were young, naive, and eager to make funny cartoons. The scripts were terrible, but we supposedly had leeway to add gags to the storyboards, which, in TV animation, was unheard of at the time. Even drawing the characters in a goofy way was forbidden, but I saw the other guys doing it, so I did too. Eddie Fitzgerald was the spirit of the department. He convinced us that we were a lot freer creatively than we were in actuality. His enthusiasm and energy infected us all.

Eddie was doing these crazy storyboards for a segment called "Quacula," about a vampire duck. "Quacula" was part of the *Mighty Mouse* series, but not an original Terrytoons character; it was created at Filmation. Eddie, like me, had recently discovered Bob Clampett's Warner Bros. shorts and they had changed his life. Prior to discovering Clampett, Eddie was perfectly happy to have a job drawing at all, even if it was on bland Filmation cartoons like *Flash Gordon*. After Clampett, Eddie was outraged at anything that didn't attempt to measure up.

He showed me his "Quacula" boards. There was a scene where the dumb bear was a short-order cook at a greasy spoon restaurant and he was flipping hamburgers. He was also unwittingly flipping a screaming and quacking Quacula on the grill. None of this action was written in the script; Eddie was adding it as he drew, and it was really funny.

The Filmation storyboard department, early 1980s.

ten miles to see a Friz Freleng cartoon. But I wouldn't walk across the street for Clampett. He's a *bum*! You hear that? A BUM!" One morning Eddie was on a deadline to turn in a board by noon. Meanwhile, Paul, who was in his mid-seventies and not too healthy, had forgotten his blood pressure pills that day and was crankier than ever. He was working at his desk, loudly ranting about Clampett, just to get Eddie's goat. "Clampett only made ten cartoons at Warner Bros. Friz made 1,000!" Milt Gray yelled over to their office, "Hey, Eddie, do you want to see this list of the ninety-eight cartoons Bob made at Warner Bros.?" Paul continued ranting, even madder now. Finally, Eddie couldn't concentrate on his work

anymore and wheeled around fast to tell Paul to pipe down so he could finish his board. He didn't realize Paul was already turned around and facing him, and Eddie found his finger pointing right in Paul's purple face. "Paul, will you please . . ." he blurted without finishing his sentence. Paul's eyes bugged in outrage, and he hauled off and punched Eddie right in the nose! Then he turned around and went back to work, continuing to curse out Clampett. Eddie was shocked, but turned around to finish his board as blood from his poor violated schnoz poured all over his drawings. Not everyone loved Clampett and his work, but at least we all felt strongly about it.

Tom Minton

I met Tom Minton at Filmation, and he was hilarious in a completely different way than anyone else there. Personally, he was dry and underplayed, but he had the craziest drawing style I had ever seen. It didn't look like what everyone else was doing. It screamed rebellion and "FU" to management, yet somehow the management loved him, and he got away with sick jokes and bizarre ideas all the time. I think Tom must have cast some kind of magic spell over executives, making them believe he was a conservative, upstanding citizen who would never think to undermine the pure and wholesome blandness of their television cartoons.

Tom would come by our office and toss in the latest script—on fire! We'd have to stomp up and down on it to put it out. We hated the scripts because they were so lame. Our boss, Bob Kline, was a super hero-type artist, not a cartoony guy, but he was very good to us, and encouraged us to be creative and funny and protected us from the bureaucracy as well as he could.

Eddie developed a drawing style that suited the tiny panels. He drew the characters with bold lines of action and expressions in broad strokes, and his compositions were brilliant. He could draw characters and backgrounds from any angle. He was not into the Hanna-Barbera style of left-to-right action and straight-on camera angles. Eddie placed his camera slightly above or below the characters, and always framed them perfectly within the background. They really looked like miniature Clampett compositions, mixed with Eddie's own exciting style. I was amazed and inspired by his work, and sometimes sat in with him, offering my own

gag suggestions. He would emit his famous guffaw that you could hear all around the studio and then redraw entire sequences, which would, of course, drive the writers crazy. They expected us to blindly obey their every disjointed line of dialogue and awkward screen direction.

Eddie was a proselytizer for Clampett. He talked about him incessantly to everyone in the studio, including his officemate, the old-timer Paul Fennell. Fennell hated Clampett, not just his work, but personally. Fennell was a pal of Friz Freleng and Bill Hanna, and he would turn to Eddie and say, "I'd walk

Eddie Fitzgerald's "Quacula" storyboards.

Tom Minton and some of his personal work, 1979.
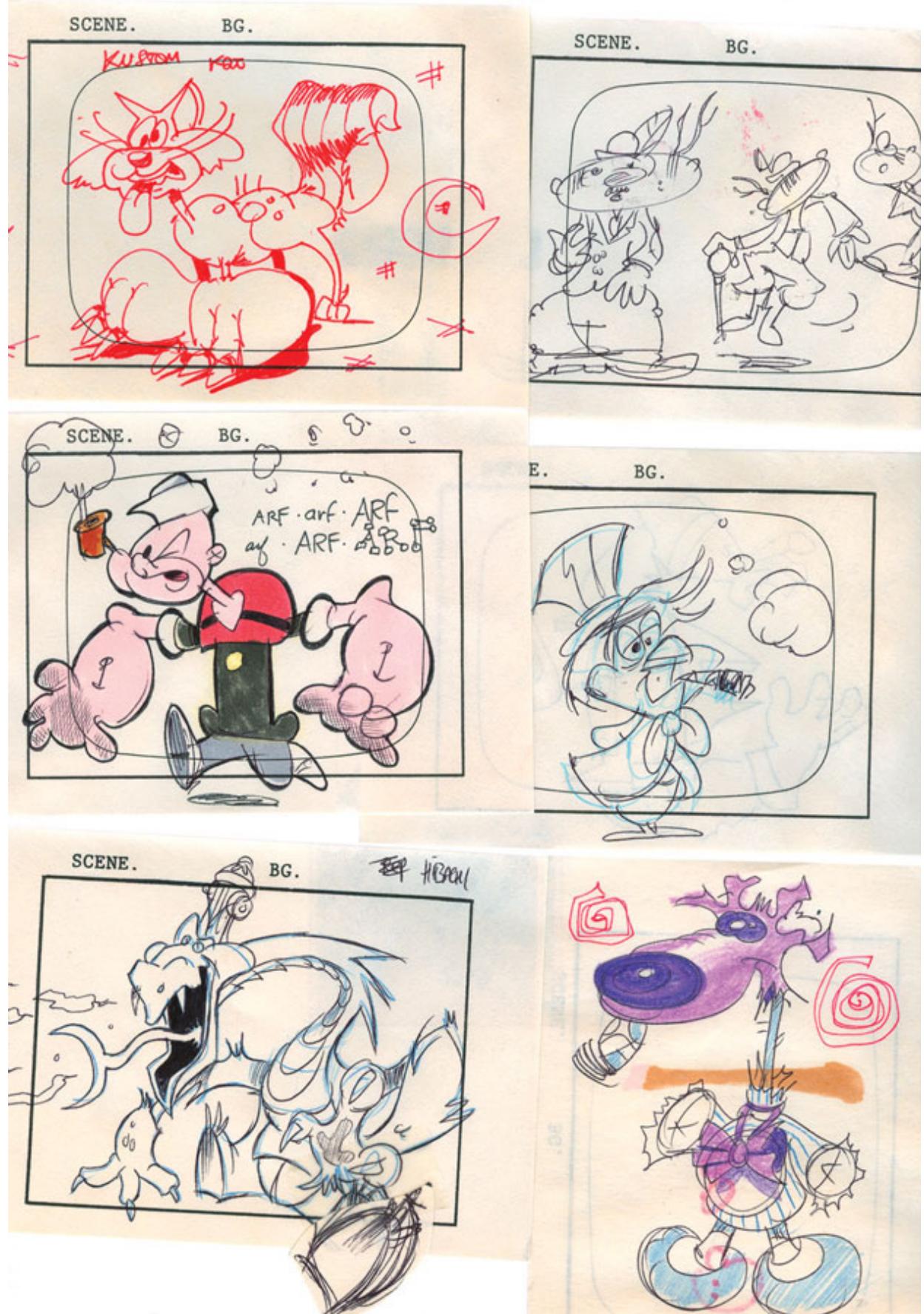
Tom Minton Filmation storyboard drawings.

Talented Wacky Crew Didn't Lead to Good Cartoons on Screen

Everyone played practical jokes on everyone else, and the whole feel of the department was like what we had read (and heard from Clampett) about the crazy antics at Termite Terrace, the run-down building where Clampett and Tex Avery directed their Warner Bros. shorts. It was all a mirage though. The storyboard artists would do their best to draw the cartoon stories funny and lively, but when we saw the finished cartoons after they'd been animated, they looked like any other Filmation cartoon—bland, stiff, lifeless, and boring. This was a real revelation to me. I realized it didn't matter what any one artist did in his department if the rest of the departments, like animation and layout, didn't follow through. The other departments at Filmation were set in their ways and went about doing things the way they had always done things.

There were a few exceptions to this though, thanks to Eddie. He would sneak around to the layout and animation departments and try to get them as excited as he was about making the cartoons look funny, and Eddie actually had some success on his own *Quacula* cartoons. Somehow he convinced the layout artists to copy the wild poses in his storyboards and do more exaggerated drawings than they typically drew. But even when they did, the drawings came out like stretched, exaggerated blandness, like someone who had never seen real cartoons trying to draw wackiness. This made some of the cartoons look truly bizarre.

There were even a couple of young animators who were willing to risk their necks by animating crazy stuff. I remember Kent Butterworth animating a huge "take" for a villain in a *Mighty Mouse* cartoon. The character grew giant veiny eyeballs and opened his mouth to scream, revealing a pimply tongue and big ragged teeth. The funny thing was that it was animated really slowly, which made the take seem unsettling, but it made it through the system and was the talk of the studio.


Tom Minton and Eddie Fitzgerald, 1980.

Meeting Bill Wray

I was wandering through the studio one day and happened upon a model sheet of Quacula that looked different from the one we had been using. It was totally professional. I asked who had done it and found out it was a redesign suggestion by an artist named Bill Wray. I had someone introduce me to him and we became friends.

Bill Wray under enemy attack.
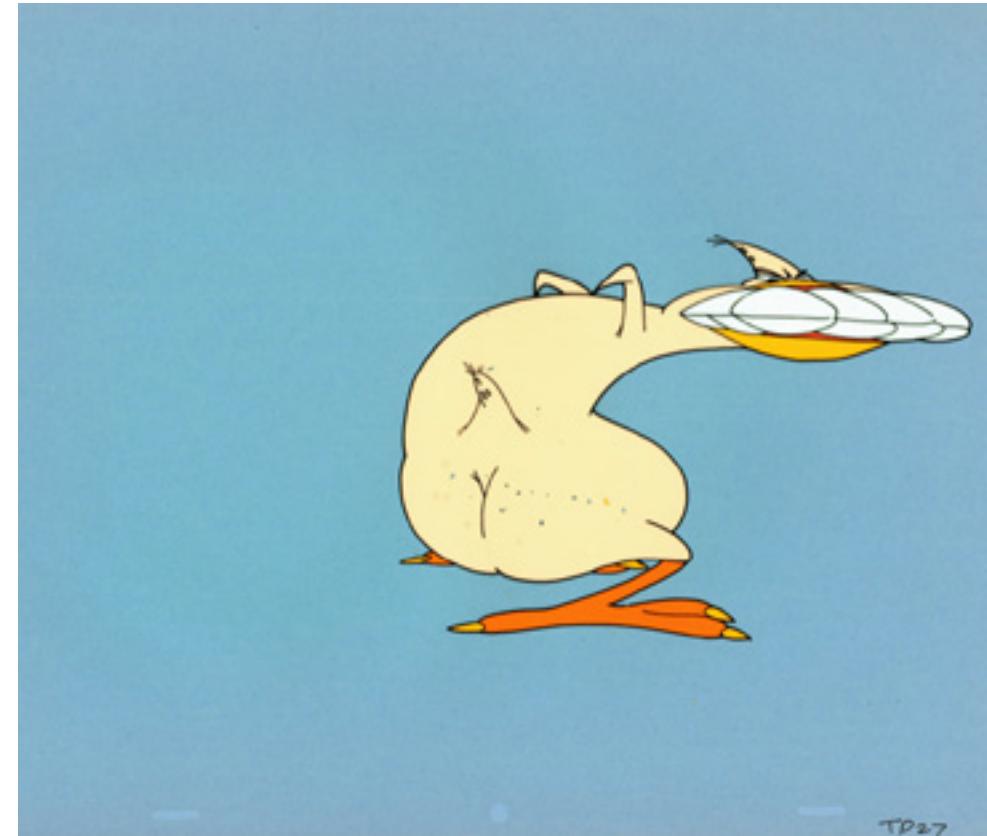
On his own, Bill landed a job around 1981 to make a cartoon for an early cable show called *Channel Zero*. He asked me to collaborate with him on the project. We storyboarded this chicken running around screaming because he had an egg stuck in his butt that he needed to lay. When he finally fires it out, it vibrates and cracks open. Inside is the world's angriest baby who does a crazy dance, and that was it. It was approved, and Bill, Lynne Naylor, and I laid it out. Lynne and I animated it, and Bill painted some surreal Clampett-inspired backgrounds. It was my first shot at doing anything of my own and I was hooked.

Bill later quit the animation business to go to New York and study art at a famous college. He was disgusted with the state of animation, and told me, "John, if you ever get anything going with your own stuff, call me, and I'll come back to work on it," which he did years later on *Ren & Stimpy*.

In the middle of this energetic environment, I struggled to draw my first tiny storyboard. It was for a Heckle and Jeckle cartoon, and I didn't know what I was doing at all. I had never drawn backgrounds, I couldn't draw small, I didn't know when to cut from a close shot to a medium or long shot, and on top of it, I was trying to fill the storyboard with funny drawings and gags. It ended up being a clunky board.

I took too long, drew too zany, and got called into the producer's office where I was fired. He told me that Filmation wasn't looking for the artists to rewrite the stories, and I had the wrong idea about the place. I asked if I could do layouts (the production stage that follows storyboards) instead, because then I could draw bigger and follow the approved boards, but the producer refused—he was trying to get the whole creative revolution under control.

Years later I saw that "zany" storyboard I had done and thought it was so tame I couldn't believe it caused even an eyebrow to lift. This was my first taste of reality in the cartoon business. No one in charge really wanted anything to be creative, funny, interesting, or different from exactly what they were used to.

Cels from Channel Zero

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Working for Bob Clampett

After being fired from Filmation, Bob Clampett asked me if I wanted to work for him part-time. He received lots of mail from fans asking for drawings of his characters. He had been doing the drawings himself, but didn't like his own drawings for some reason, and he asked me to do them for a while. I would find his lively doodles of Sylvester and Porky lying around the office, and they still looked like thirties and forties versions of the characters. I'd show them to him, and he'd quickly grab them from me and hide them.

My caricature of Bob with his Cecil hand puppet.

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He let me work at his animation desk, and would stand behind me drinking Cokes, burping and farting, while I drew. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked politely as some gas slipped out. I encouraged it.

At first he had me draw the characters in the later Warner Bros. house style. I had to draw Friz Freleng's tamer version of Tweety, which Bob would then color in yellow crayons, sign, and send to his fans. I drew the bland Bugs and the angular, mean Daffy for him, but felt that it wasn't the right thing to do. Bob had a bit of an inferiority complex about his cartoons because a lot of propaganda had been spread about how wild and "undisciplined" they were. He wasn't as well-remembered as Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng, or Tex Avery—even though to my mind it was Bob's style that, more than anybody else's, set the Warner Bros. cartoons apart from Disney's. His cartoons were the template for the other directors, and the spark for the "irreverent" Warner Bros. style. The other directors, as good as they were, were influenced by Clampett, and pushed beyond their own natural limits by his ideas, technique, and example. He was the guiding force behind the whole aesthetic.

I told Bob I thought his versions of the Warner Bros. characters were much cooler than the bland modern versions he was asking me to use, and asked if I could draw them in his style. He was nervous about it

and said he thought the fans wouldn't recognize the characters in the older style. "If they are fans of yours, they would want *your* style, not Friz's," I told him. He consented, and I began drawing Bugs, Daffy, and Tweety in his style (well, my own inept, young version of his style), while he colored them in with his Crayolas. I also made him color Tweety flesh-color like he was in Bob's cartoons, not yellow as in later incarnations.

A flyer I drew for a screening of Bob's films in 1981.

Another of my caricatures of Bob .

Cheese Sandwiches

At lunch, Bob would bring me into his office, sit behind his desk, and tell me stories of the old days at Termite Terrace and *Beany and Cecil.* He would take out a brown lunch bag, slowly open it, take out a neatly wrapped wax-papered treat, and unwrap it for me. It was always a cheese sandwich, on white bread, with the crusts cut off, and one skinny slice of American cheese with a layer of margarine underneath the top slice of bread. He'd wink at me and tell me Sody made it herself.

After lunch, I would pretend to go out for a cigarette break and walk up the street to a greasy hamburger stand and order a giant double cheeseburger, wolf it down, and rush back to Bob's desk to hear more funny stories while getting farted and burped on.

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Applying for a Job With Friz Feleng

Around this time I heard that Friz Freleng was starting up an animation team to make *The Looney Looney Looney Bugs Bunny Movie*. They were going to animate new bridge material to link together clips from the classic cartoons. I wanted to work on it, maybe as an assistant animator to one of the greats, so I could have fun and learn something real. I owned a lot of Super 8 cartoon films and a reel-to-reel viewer that allowed me to study the *Looney Tunes* frame by frame, and copy the poses of Bugs, Daffy, Tweety, Sylvester, and the bunch.

When I went to my appointment at Warner Bros., I was met by Friz's secretary, Jean MacCurdy. She was very nice, looked at my drawings, and said she thought they were very good. Then she showed them to Virgil Ross, a veteran animator at the studio. He liked them too, and said he wouldn't mind having me assist him. But we still needed Friz to OK it. Finally he came out. Jean introduced me and Friz scowled, "You're a little green, aren't you? Goddamn young people can't draw worth a crap anymore." He looked through the drawings, and then peered at me with one eye. "Hmm, these look just like the characters. What'd ya do, trace these?" I explained that I didn't trace them, but I did copy them directly from the films. He didn't believe me.

Then he discovered some Tweety drawings in the stack. I had done both Friz's version of Tweety, and Bob Clampett's earlier version, when he was pink and proportioned differently. He looked at the Clampett Tweety drawings, and said, "Oh, that old thing. That's the Clampett bird." He looked at me. "Clampett was too wild. This bird is ugly. When I took over, I made him cute—I gave him bigger eyes." Friz didn't give me the job. Afterward, I compared Bob's Tweety to Friz's, and found that in fact Bob drew him way cuter—and with much bigger eyes.
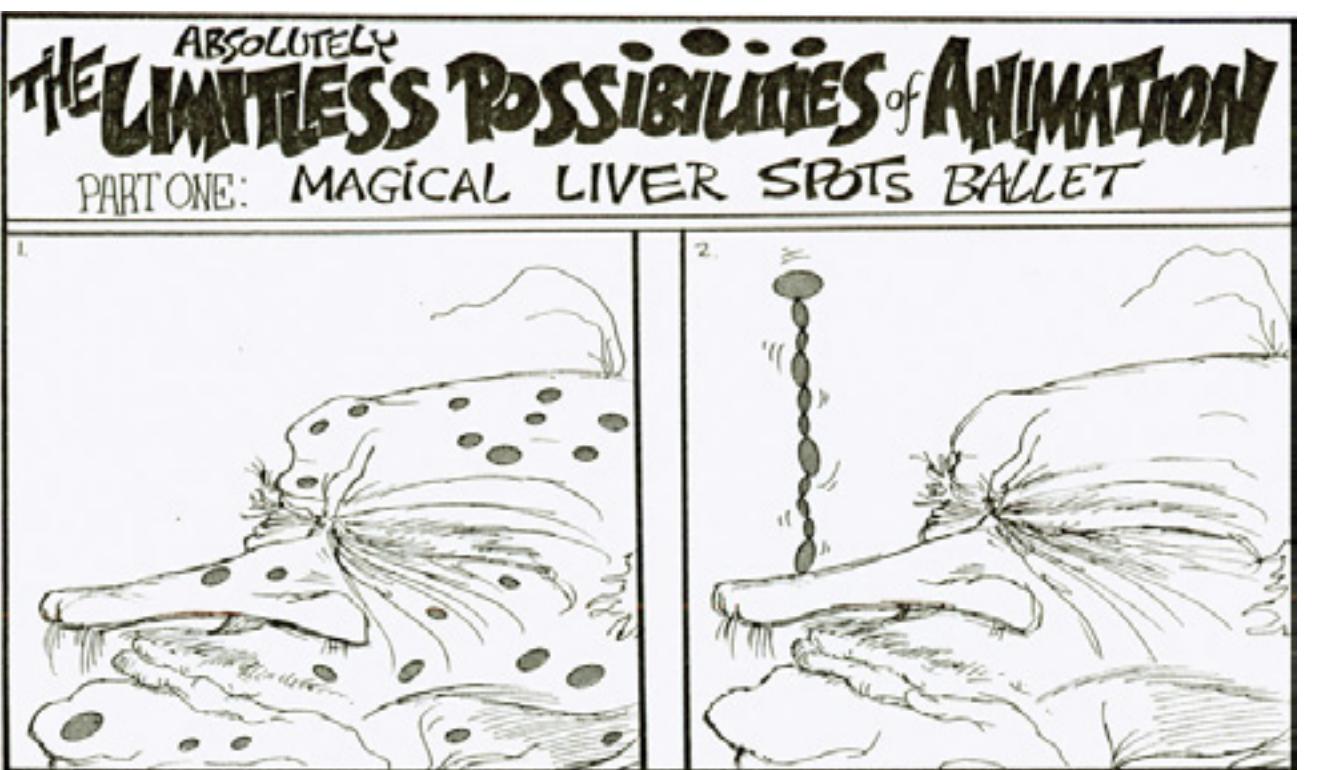
A Tom Minton cartoon that nicely sums up the animator's life



My own attempts at Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny.
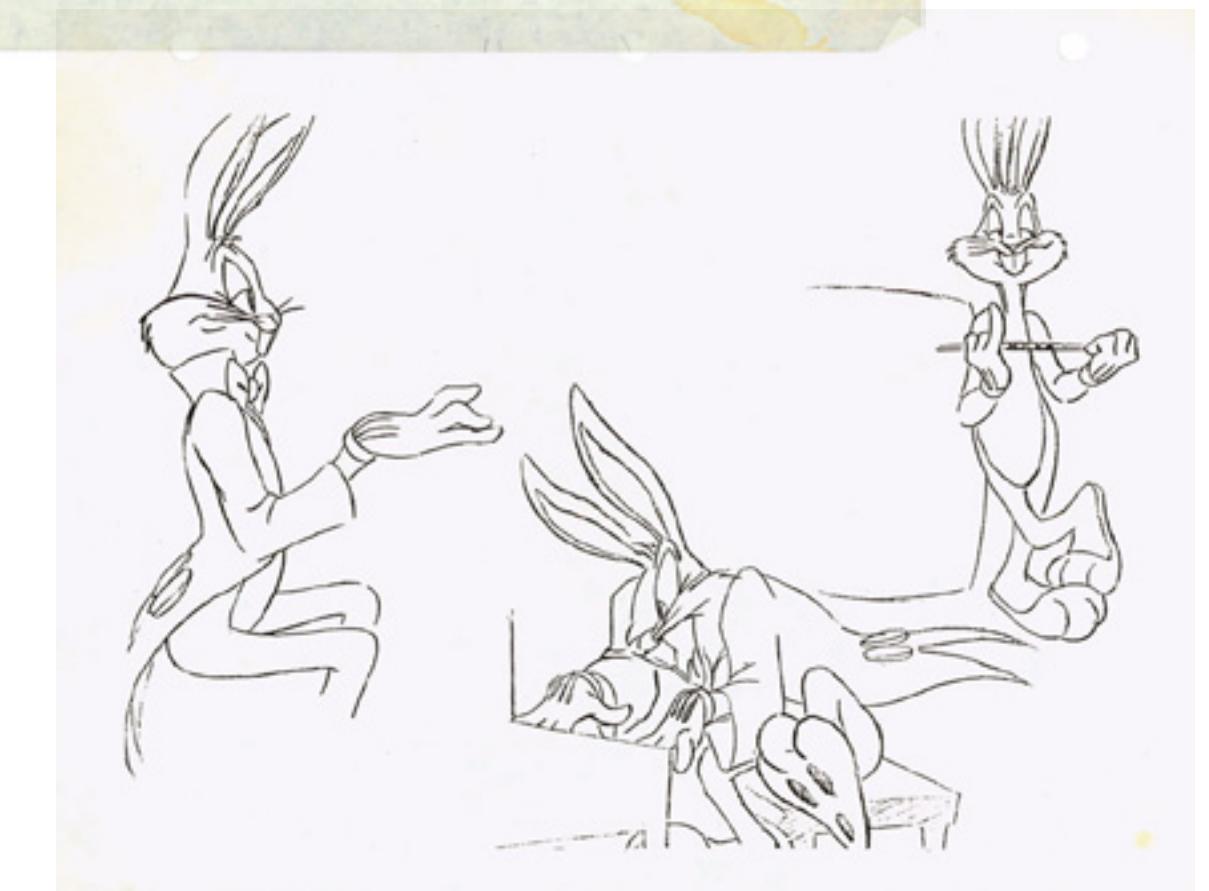
Filmation Tom and Jerry Learning Layout

The year after Filmation destroyed *Mighty Mouse*, they decided to follow up their achievement by destroying *Tom and Jerry* and *Droopy*. They re-hired me in the layout department headed by Franco Cristofani. The layout department was in an annex away from the main offices. There were two layout units, and I was in Franco's working on *Droopy* cartoons.

The studio's character designer, Alberto De Mello, had recently discovered construction models of classic cartoon characters from the 1940s. These model sheets that showed the artists how to draw the characters by dividing them into their basic shapes, like in Preston Blair's famous animation instruction books.

I imagine that Eddie or one of the storyboard artists had shown him the Preston Blair book and some original studio model sheets from the past. Alberto had never drawn like this before. He was very excited about this new way of drawing—and completely misunderstood it.
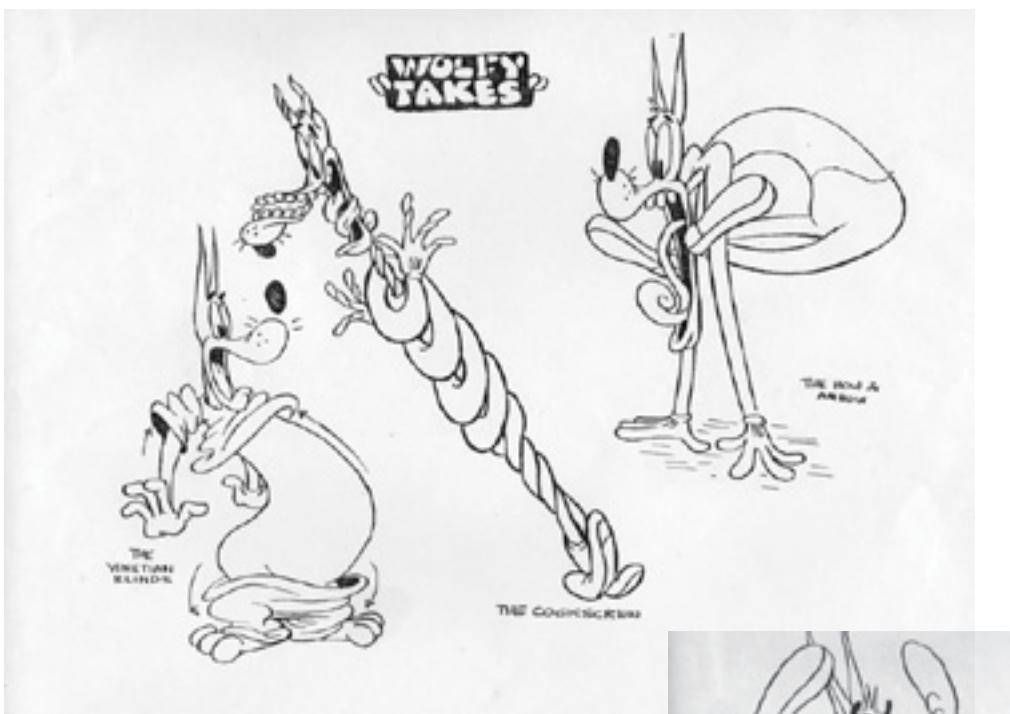
"Wolfy" model sheets.

CONSTRUCTION
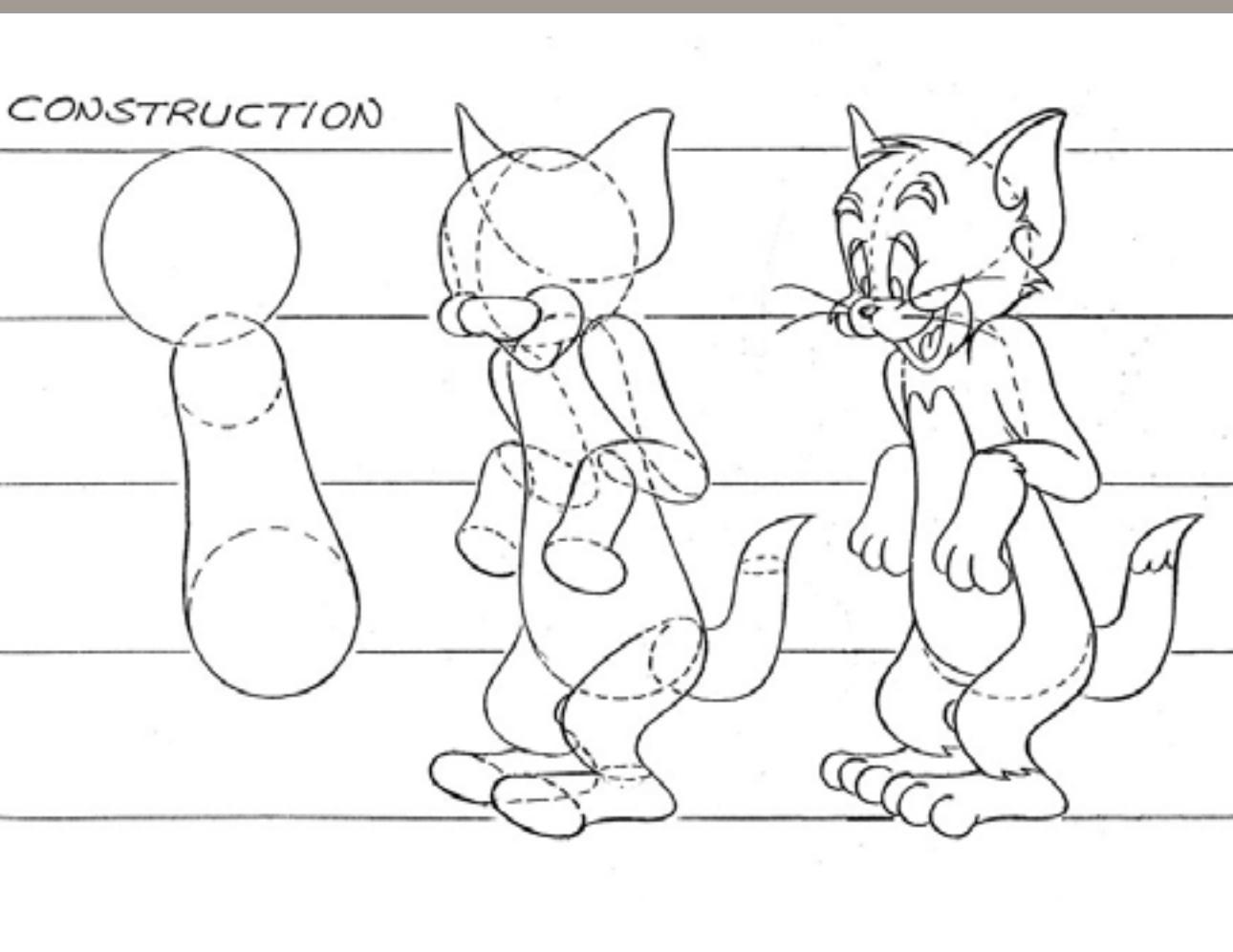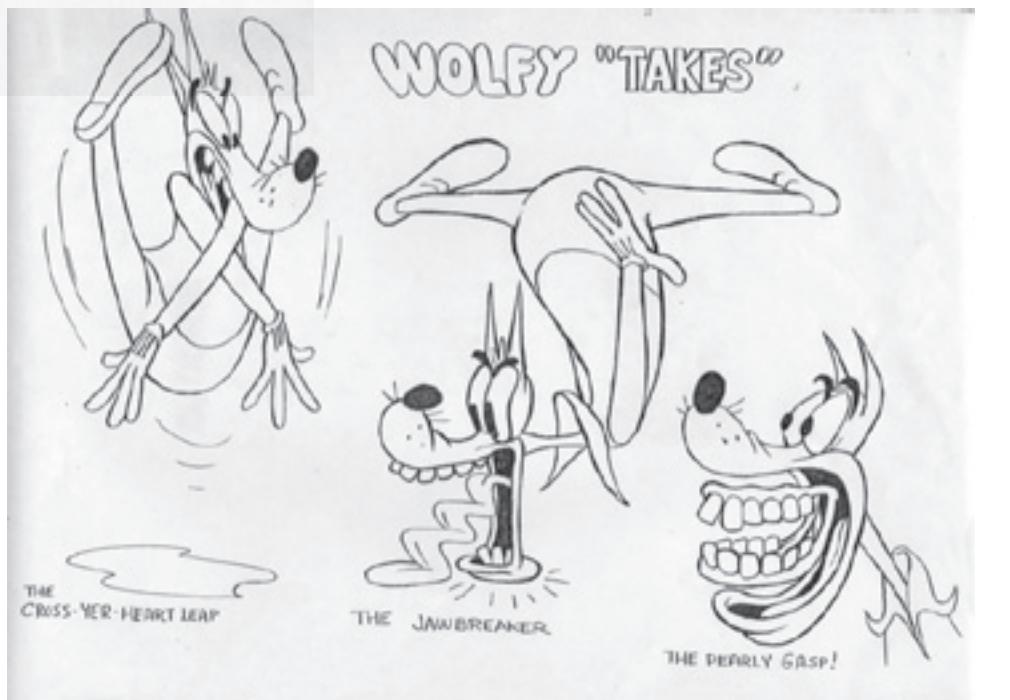
Tom and Jerry model sheets by Alberto Wolfe.
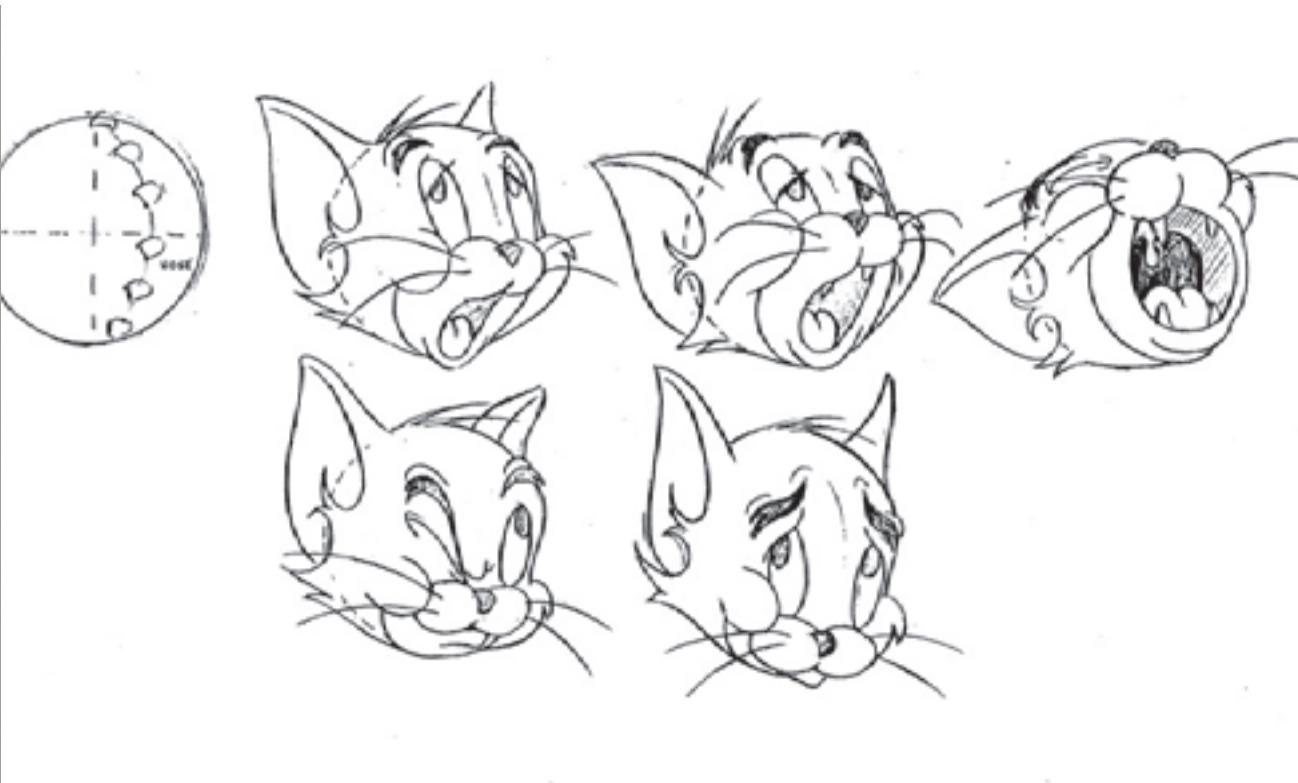
Layouts Easier
Than Storyboards

We had to draw Alberto De Mello's wildly elaborate, nonsensical model sheets of characters made up of balloon-like shapes and sausage fingers and toes. Each balloon and wienie was crawling with lines of crosshairs and extra planes that weren't actually manifested in the final cleaned-up drawing.

These classic characters, who were naturally appealing in their earlier incarnations, were now frightening balloon-and-sausage-monsters. I refused to draw them this way. I kept the old model sheets at my desk and used those.

I found layout work to be much easier than creating storyboards. All the staging was already figured out, and I could draw bigger and concentrate more on the poses and expression of the characters. I always hoped for Eddie's boards because they were the easiest and most fun to work from, with clear staging, and dynamic, direct, and funny poses.

I copied Eddie's poses, only bigger. I drew them tighter and added more details to the expressions. I also started to add more poses on my own to break down the actions. Filmation only wanted one pose per scene, but drawing the characters acting was where I could exercise some creativity and have a good time. The other guys in the department would come over to see what I was doing because it was so much livelier than the typical TV layout drawing. Even Alberto would pull up his chair behind me, giggle, and say, "Oh, I love the way you move your pencil. Let me hold your wrist while you draw

so I can see how it feels." Doing layouts at Filmation gave me the foundation to later build on my own TV animation system.

At the same time I was still discovering old cartoons I had never seen before, and tried to put elements of them into my layouts. I remember one particular scene of a cartoon I was doing a layout for, where a character had to do a fast zip pan from one area to another. I had been studying Chuck Jones's *The Dover Boys*, and saw all these abstract background pans that didn't make any sense but propelled the movement along, and I thought that was really neat. So I drew a long pan scene where each end of the pan was a normal background, but I filled the middle with crazy shapes, floating eyeballs, and weirdness.

A few days later, Franco came in and said there was a big problem downstairs with one of my scenes. The head of the background department, Erv Kaplan, who painted everything pink-purple-and green, was having a fit. He had just discovered my eyeball pan and refused to paint it. Franco sent me down to speak with him. I didn't know what to say, and expected to get fired. I sheepishly went into his office and saw him sitting there in a pink, purple, and green-stained smock. He was in a real huff. I asked him why he didn't want to paint the background, and the only answer he had was that he didn't like it and it made no sense. I started talking about *The Dover Boys* to him, but he didn't want any part of it. Erv said, "No more eyeballs or abstract shapes in the backgrounds!" And that was the end of that.

Crazy Executive Notes

We also had to deal with notes from the network executive, Faith Heckman. One note furiously said: "These storyboards are too violent! Why do the characters have to make threatening gestures all the time? You will traumatize the poor innocent frail children in the audience." We looked through the boards and couldn't find the violence she was referring to; there were big takes and wacky action, but no physical threats. Someone called Heckman to ask her to tell us exactly what panels had threatening gestures. She gave us a list. We looked and found that they were the scenes where characters were anticipating before zipping off screen. Characters would make fists as they anticipated forward movement. Faith explained that these fists were a terrible example of violence for the children, and from then on made us draw the fingers spread out whenever a character zipped off screen.

Sometimes we'd get lucky. Eddie would do the board for a Droopy cartoon, I would do the layouts, and Lynne Naylor, who was in the animation department, would animate it—that way everything, for once, would get through the pipeline without being watered down.

Lynne is the nicest person in the world, and would never try to offend anyone, but she apparently offended Lou Scheimer, the owner of Filmation. He had seen a section of a *Droopy* cartoon at the Moviola and it was full of "smears," those stretchy in-betweens we all loved in *The Dover Boys*. Lou started yelling, "Who did this? Who did this? Find him and fire him!" The head of the animation department went to bat for Lynne and managed to calm Lou down. Lynne kept her job, but was more cautious after that episode.

Jeff John, Popular
and Freelance Layouts

While working at Filmation, I met another young cartoonist named Jeff John. He, like me, was a fan of classic cartoons. In 1982, after the work for Droopy and Tom and Jerry finished, Jeff suggested we start a company to do freelance layouts for the various cartoon studios. Tom Minton and Lynne Naylor were also partners. We needed a name, and Tom suggested "Popular Animation Group." He recalled that it came about in reference to filmmaker Don Bluth's publicity at the time and how his studio was going to lead a rebirth of "classical animation." We were interested in animation becoming popular again, hence the name. We rented an apartment and picked up work on such TV classics as *Laverne and Shirley in the Army*, *The Gary Coleman Show*, and *The Trollkins*, a show about characters that looked like they were made of tiny poos and lived in a poo-world.

Popular Animation Group
Christmas card, 1982.
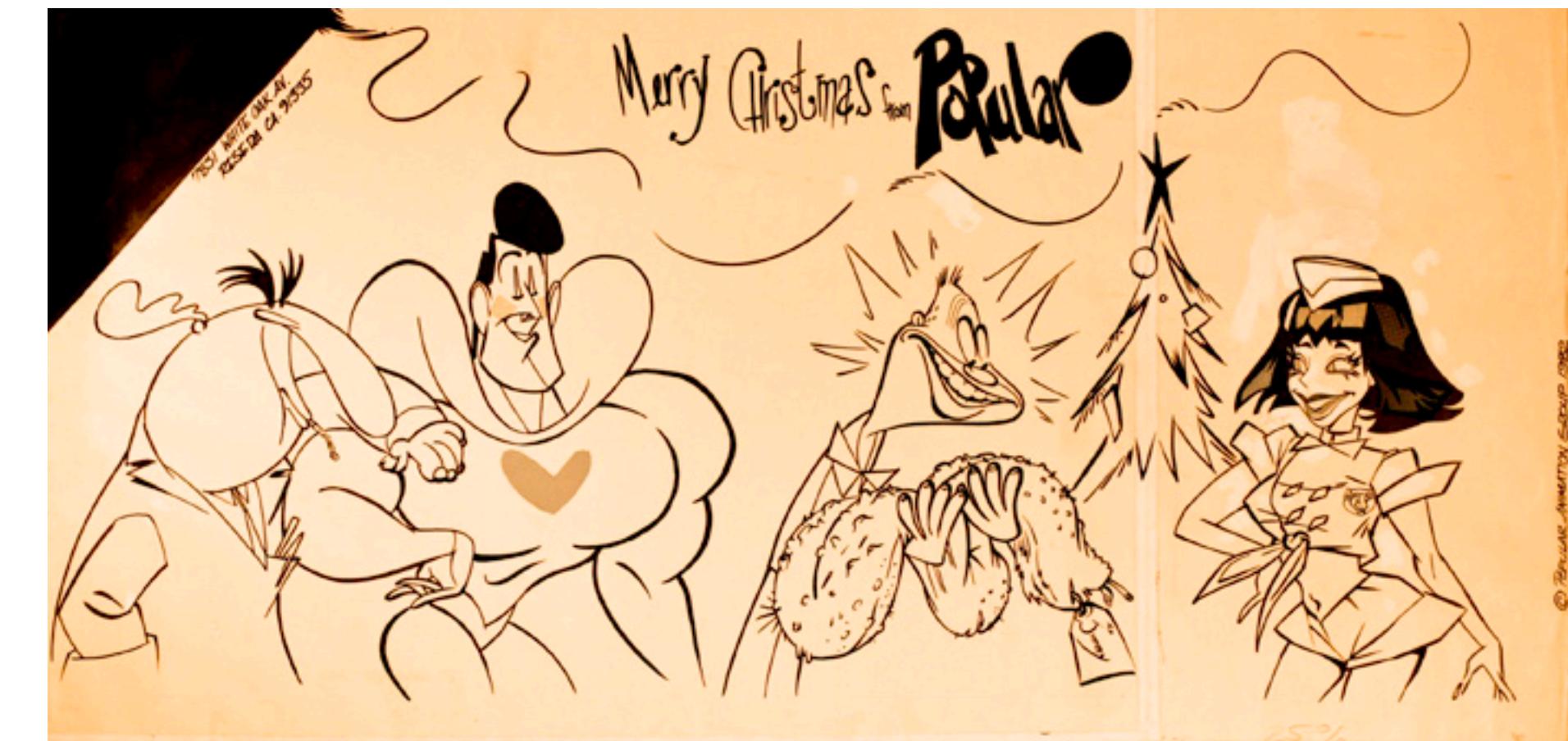
Brik Blastoff of the Outback
concept art.

Popular Animation Group

While working at Popular Animation Group I continued to develop my own characters. Tom, Jeff, Lynne, and I developed the Brik Blastoff of the Outback concept into a full-blown presentation that we took to the Playboy Channel. The executive there loved it, because it had pretty, half-naked girls in it, but when he told us their budgets, we knew we couldn't afford to make even the most limited of limited animation shows. The animation union had one of their periodic strikes in the early 1980s, which always had the curious effect of sending more jobs overseas. The strike didn't affect me because I was freelancing through Popular, which was non-union. I was doing layout work for Hanna-Barbera on the cartoon *Laverne and Shirley in the Army*—a god-awful thing. Art Scott was the producer and when the strike hit, he wouldn't allow me to come to Hanna-Barbera's studio anymore. Instead, he'd ask Jeff and me to meet him behind the Thrifty Drug Store to pick up animation scenes. Art would be standing there with dark glasses and a suspicious briefcase looking like an enemy spy from a James Bond film. One time, he was all upset because he needed layouts for a show, but the character model artists were on strike and couldn't design the incidental character models. I never understood why they needed a model department in the first place, so I said, "Don't worry about it, Art. I'll draw the models!" It was my first experience officially designing characters for a show.

This particular *Laverne and Shirley* episode took place in a jungle setting and Laverne and Shirley were supposed to be captured by natives, but the natives hadn't been designed yet. I knew I couldn't draw real natives, because that would be politically incorrect, so I drew the Three Stooges in jungle costumes. In another episode, they needed a stern cop so I drew him as Kirk Douglas—the first time I used Kirk in a cartoon. These were very bland, semi-realistic caricatures trying to match the Scooby-Doo style of 1980s cartoons, but even when I tried to draw bland, it scared the crap out of Art. "These are great drawings, John, but they are caricatures of caricatures, and the show is already a caricature. You're drawing them too cartoony." "Too cartoony" a dictum I have heard repeated thousands of times by different producers, directors, and cartoon authorities.

Steve, "the straight man" of
Brik Blastoff, even though she's
a woman.

Fenwick and Merv character
designs for the *Heathcliff*
cartoon produced by DiC from
1984–1987.

Hanna-Barbera

Designer On Heathcliff

After working on horrible and depressing cartoons for four years, I desperately wanted
to work on something fun. In 1984, I had just finished a stint as a designer for DiC's
Heathcliff series when I heard that Hanna-Barbera was reviving *The Jetsons*. Even
though *Heathcliff* had been my best job so far because I didn't have to do storyboards
from bad scripts or layouts from bad storyboards. It was my first staff character design
job, and they gave me a lot of freedom to draw the characters as cute and funny as I
was then capable. It was a good experience and I did about seven shows a week with
Bruce Timm and Jim Gomez as my cleanup artists, and Lynne Naylor designing some
of the characters with me.

Days in the Heathcliff alley
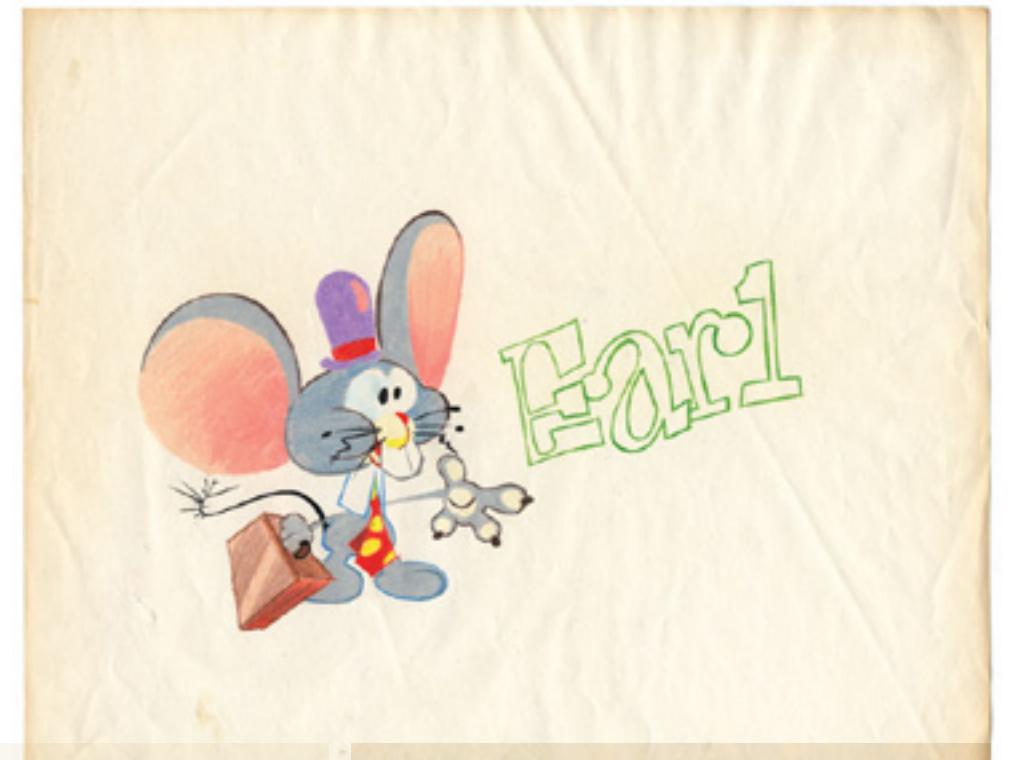
Stack of Jetsons

As soon as I heard about the *Jetsons* revival, I raced over to Hanna-Barbera to apply to be the character designer. I drew a big stack of sample Jetsons-style characters, and showed them to Bob Singer, who was the head of the studio's incidental character design department. He looked through them with much attention and was mildly impressed. "I'll give you a test," he said. "If you work in-house on *The Smurfs* as a designer for awhile, we'll see how you do, and I'll consider showing your stuff to the bosses."

AARGH! Torture. A month or two went by, and I became more and more depressed working on *The Smurfs*. The whole time I would hear rumors that *The Jetsons* producer Alex Lovy (who had directed *Woody Woodpecker* cartoons at Walter Lantz Productions),

along with Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera themselves, were rejecting everything that the design department was doing.

I was dying to barge into Joe's office and find out whether he thought I was up to the task or not. I couldn't stand another day of *The Smurfs* and decided to quit. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I marched over to Hanna-Barbera's executive building, and walked down the hall hoping to run into Bill or Joe, when I bumped into Alex Lovy.

Clutching my huge stack of *Jetsons* samples and nervous as hell, I blurted out, "Mr. Lovy, you don't know me, but I'm a big fan of yours. I love Woody Woodpecker and I know you are producing *The Jetsons* and I'm dying to work for you!"

My Jetsons character samples, circa 1985.

Meeting Alex Lovy

Alex was real nice and invited me into his office. He had framed pictures of himself all over the walls. He was a dapper old guy with a face like Jimmy Durante, clothes like Fred Astaire, and a jaunty golf cap to cover his balding head. The photos on the wall showed him hanging out alternately with famous celebrities and his army of hot, young girlfriends. As he started flipping through the drawings, his eyes lit up and he said, "Hey kid, this is just what we're looking for. You got this old style down. Let's go see if Joe is in his office."

He whisked me down the hall and knocked on the door to Joe's office. Joe opened the door and there he was. I was looking at my childhood hero in the flesh for the first time: a tall, suave Italian guy in a nice suit and jet-black curly hair.

"Joe, you gotta see what this kid is doing," Lovy said. Joe led us in and started flipping through the drawings and chuckling. He smiled real big, and then smacked the stack of drawings. "This is what we've been trying to get for months now," he said. "I keep telling Iwao and the

guys that this is an old-fashioned UPA-style show and that it's supposed to be flat, but no one will do it."

During the conversation, I stupidly told him that I hated *Scooby-Doo* and all the new cartoons. Joe said, "Me too, kid. I've never understood why the networks keep ordering more episodes of it. What is there to it? A big dumb dog and some teenagers. Every show is the same goddamn story. It doesn't make sense to me, but they can have it as long as they want it." I was amazed that Joe wasn't offended by my comment. This was my first inkling that Joe really knew how awful the cartoons that his studio had been churning out for decades were.

Joe rubbed his face and gave it some thought. "Son, I want you on this show but I gotta figure out how to do it without offending the design supervisors, Bob Singer and Iwao Takamoto. These guys got feelings, you know. They've been here a long time. But don't worry, I'll work it out and get you on."

Joe's solution was to send me to Taipei where I would be the layout supervisor and teach a crew of Taiwanese assistant animators to draw layouts. Singer and his crew would continue to churn out awkward model sheets of incidental characters in Los Angeles, while unbeknownst to them, I had the permission and encouragement of Bill and Joe to junk them and redo the characters myself in the vintage style. This way, in theory, the model department would never know that we weren't using their work, and their egos would remain intact.

I asked Bill if I could also bring Lynne Naylor with me to Taiwan. She could help me teach the others, while at the same time doing many layouts and designs herself. Bill agreed and Lynne ended up supervising some of the episodes and the crew loved her.

The Taiwan Crew

The studio in Taipei, James Wang's Cuckoo's Nest, assigned me a young crew of artists who had little production experience. It was lucky for me that they didn't have more experience because had they been trained in the crazy 1980s cartoon production pipeline before I got to work with them, it would have been impossible to break their bad habits.

These kids were naive and believed anything I said because I was the Western expert on animation— a hairy cartoon godhead. I told them everything that was contrary to 1980s animation production, like "Drawing cartoons should be fun," and "You should listen to the soundtrack and then custom design each pose of the character to match the sound of the emotions. Don't merely trace the model sheets."

When the studio heads introduced me to the artists, I asked each artist what his name was and they cast frightened glances at each other. The translator took me aside and whispered to me, "We no give you their Chinese names. We give them nice Western names. Make it easy for you to remember." There were about nine artists in the crew, with names like Ronald, Oscar, and Bin. Some of them were very good cartoonists, and years later I hired Bin and others to animate my Björk music video.

James Wang's Cuckoos Nest
(and Lynne).

Trying to get some acting into George Jetson. Layouts by Bin, 1985.

Bin

Bin was especially eager and had a style that reminded me of *Terrytoons* animator Carlo Vinci. What's remarkable is that none of these guys had had any significant exposure to classic American cartoons. They didn't grow up with them, and yet they picked up the style quickly. They laughed at every handout I gave them, and would rush back to their desks to create work to impress me. These guys never went home. They slept overnight at their desks, were always cheerful, and couldn't wait to get their next scenes.

They called me "Mr. John" and always bowed to me whenever they came to pick up work. They were always

chewing this horrible, stinky Chinese root that made them burp and fart constantly. These weren't like Bob Clampett's welcomed genius emittances; these would singe your neck hairs off. God help you if one hit you in the face. They would smile broadly while I acted out scenes for them and their blackened teeth gleamed with the stinky root juice.

On Friday nights, I would screen classic cartoons and *The Three Stooges* shorts in the cafeteria, and everyone would come in and laugh their butts off. They couldn't believe how magical the animation and timing was in the old days, and would ask me to explain what happened to

American entertainment. "Why isn't it good anymore, Mr. John?" There was even a crew of Japanese artists working on some anime show who loved watching old American cartoons and films. They went nuts for *The Three Stooges*. They would all imitate Curly's laughs and *woo-woos* during the screenings. No one understood the words in any of the shorts, but the visual humor and storytelling was so strong in the thirties and forties that everyone could understand what was happening.

The Voice Tracks Revolution

Once we started drawing the production layouts, I began to think about how I could draw the expressions better. It occurred to me that we didn't know how the actors were reading the lines because there are a million ways to read the same line. I called Bob Hathcock, the producer at Hanna-Barbera, and asked him for cassette tapes of the voice actors' recordings for the *Jetsons*. Bob sounded confused. He cupped his hand over the receiver and I heard him talking to his junior producer, Jeff something-or-other, who hated my guts. "Is that Kricfalusi on the phone again? What the hell does he want now?" Jeff asked Hathcock. "He wants the recordings!" Hathcock said. "What the f— for?" "How should I know? Just humor him. No one else will take this job!"

By the 1980s cartoons had decayed so badly that no one knew what a drawn facial expression was anymore, let alone a specific custom-tailored one. They expected you to literally trace the three poses that were provided on the model sheet. Drawing specific expressions inspired by the voice tracks was one of the first changes I brought to the TV production system.

Our layouts were looking good—fun, lively, and in context of the stories. In other words, a complete departure from the TV animation of the time. A new problem, though, quickly presented itself. When I checked the animation tests, they didn't look anything like the layouts. The animators—who were not under my supervision—had been trained to draw everything "on-model" and would find the expressions and poses in our layouts that weren't on the model sheets and change them back. You can't imagine how frustrating this was for me. All the guys in my crew had killed themselves to do really fun, unique drawings, but the system was geared to erase them.

Ernesto and Dave

Luckily the animation supervisor, Ernesto Lopez, was sympathetic to what we were doing. I talked to him and he did a good job of making sure his animators would use our poses. He even animated numerous funny scenes himself. But then we had to worry about the assistant animators who had been trained to take all the life out of the drawings that made it to their desks.

Ernesto did a few cartoons and then headed back to Los Angeles, soon to be replaced by another animation director, David Feiss. In the meantime, there would be a month without an animation director and Hathcock didn't know what to do. I proposed that he let me direct an episode and he agreed. The next story on the production line was a funny one written and storyboarded by Tony Benedict, the last storyboard artist who was still allowed to write his own stories. His boards were always the most lively, and I couldn't wait to direct his latest, "Hi-Tech Wreck."

Tony Benedict's storyboard
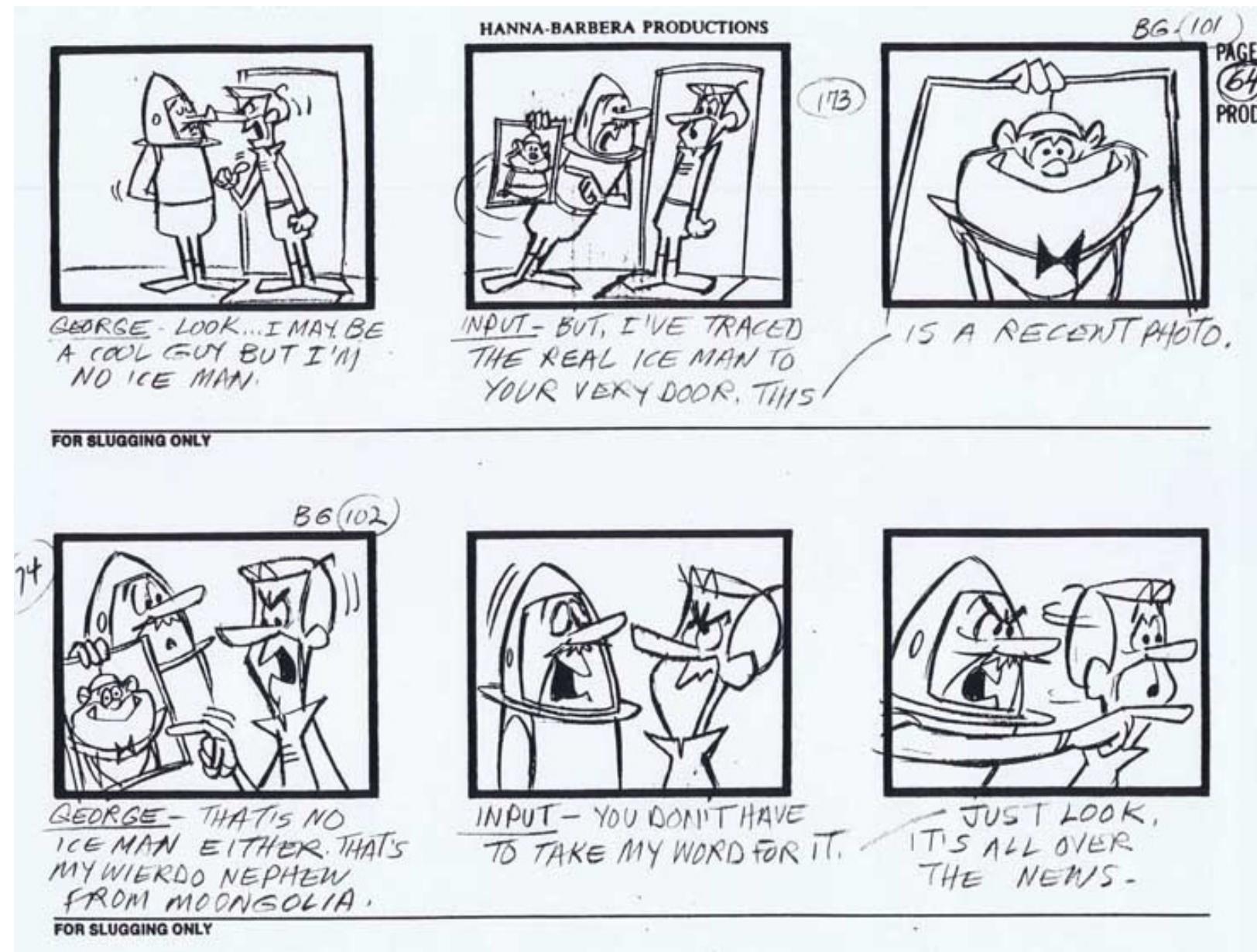
Quiet Spacely scenes, 1985.
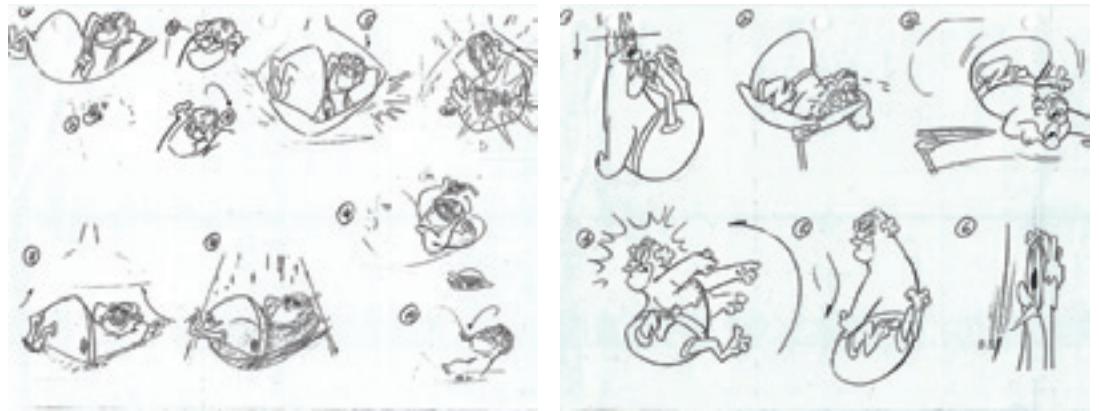
First Directing Job

I handed Benedict's assignment out to the animators myself and then chased it all over the studio through every department. I managed to convince every assistant to use our layouts, but when the pencil tests came back, the layout poses were still missing. I had a big fight about this with the studio owner, James Wang, and demanded to know who was erasing our drawings. I grabbed some of the finished scenes and found these mysterious yellow sheets of paper where every layout pose was supposed to happen. On the yellow sheets, the poses had been turned "on-model". I asked James who was doing this and he played dumb.

So then I hunted around, scratching my head, and found a hidden secret group—the dreaded "Yellow-Sheet Department"! We never saw these people and no one admitted their existence, but I caught them in the act. There was a little hole in the wall with a door that would flip open. A hand would grab the finished scenes out of the assistant animation department and they would come back stuffed with yellow pieces of paper where they had removed the expressive drawings and replaced them with standard model sheet poses. The funny part is that the people doing this weren't even artists; they were the animation checkers. So I had to take out all the yellow sheets and replace them with our layouts, and then retrace them myself in a clean line to fit in with the rest of the animation. The final result of undermining this crazy production system was that we produced a few shows that actually have my crew's drawings in them and they were the first shows of the 1980s to actually have some expressions in them.

If a scene was merely expository or transitional, I usually tried to add a bit of business to make it funny. I remember one scene where George Jetson was riding up the elevator tube to get to his apartment. It was a boring transition so I drew a wild party going on in one of the apartments that George passed by. The room had a banner that read "36-Hour Marathon Ranger Smith Cook-Off". The apartment was filled with people dressed as Ranger Smith who were dancing and whooping it up. Dave Feiss thought it was hilarious and followed the scene through the animation process to make sure it made it into the picture. The fun-hating fiends at Hanna-Barbera found it though and removed it from the episode.

Layout drawing

Animation cleanup

The dreaded "On Model" yellow sheet.

Great Lynne Naylor layouts.
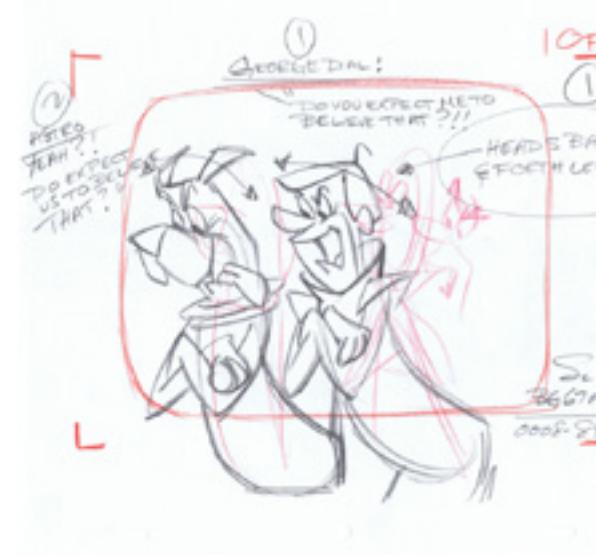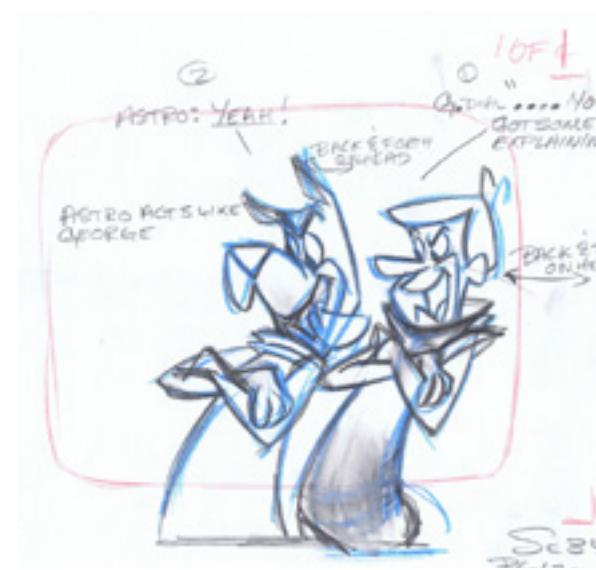
The mighty Bill Hanna.

Back In LA

In 1985, I returned to the United States, and half of the studio was in a furor and hated my guts for destroying the show, but Bill Hanna loved what I had done. He invited me into his office, shook my hand, and said, "You did a great job. The shows look wonderful. You can have any job you want in the studio. Just go ahead and name the position."

"I would like to have the same job Fred Quimby gave you and Joe in 1939 at MGM," I told him. "What's that?" he asked. "Make my own cartoons in your studio using the unit system. I'll use your characters, but I want to make them the way you did. It was just you, Joe, and your animators when you made a name for yourselves at MGM and won seven Academy Awards and built this wonderful empire. There were no writers involved and no story department. Cartoonists made their own cartoons. That's all I ask, give me the same chance that Fred Quimby gave you that led to all this greatness."

Bill jumped up and pounded the desk with his fist. "Goddamn right! You're goddamned right! We didn't need any goddamned writers to win seven Academy Awards! We did it ourselves. This is a great idea John, I love this. You know what? Let me get Jeannie in here."

Jean MacCurdy, who had been Friz Freleng's secretary, was now the head of Hanna-Barbera's story department. Don't ask me why—she had never written a story in her life. She didn't have anything to do with stories, but she was in charge of Charlie Howell, Gordon Bressack, Tom Ruegger, and all the writers, which was a separate department from the artists. To this day, it makes no sense to me to separate the writing process from the artists. I don't know why they let it happen because it made no sense to Bill, Joe, or any of the other old-timers.

"Jeannie, John here has a great idea. Go ahead, John, tell her!" Bill said.

"Well, alright, here's the idea," I explained to Jean. "Bill offered me a job doing anything I want, and I said I want to direct my own cartoons and not have to go through all these different departments. Just do it with a little unit of cartoonists, and not have scripts. Write it all on storyboards, the way *Tom and Jerry* and *Huckleberry Hound* and *The Flintstones* were made."

Jean turned white. Bill leaned really close to her, and said, "What do you think of that idea, Jeannie? Pretty goddamned good idea, isn't it?" She warbled, "It's a wonderful idea, Mr. Hanna."

Bill set me up in a trailer and gave me enough money to hire a couple people to start developing ideas. I hired Eddie Fitzgerald's wife, Mary. who was skilled at story structure, and would type up my story ideas, add her own, and put them into a presentable form. In addition to stories, I was also drawing presentation artwork in a mad frenzy.

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Perry Gunnite

My new team and I started work right away developing *Perry Gunite*, a spoof on the film noir/detective genre set in *The Flintstones*' Stone-Age community of Bedrock. In the pitch, we labeled Perry "the original *hard-boiled* detective." In the premier episode, we planned to show him relaxing in a giant eggcup, steaming, until his secretary tells him he's done. Charlie Howell and Tom Minton also contributed story ideas to the project.

We were in there for all of two weeks when Bill called me back into his office. "Well, I guess we have a little political problem here, John. I love what you guys are doing, but you know, it's really Joe's department to do the development. It's not right for me to be encroaching on his territory. But you can have any other job you want in the studio; you just can't do your own stuff."

So I left the studio, jaded and defeated.
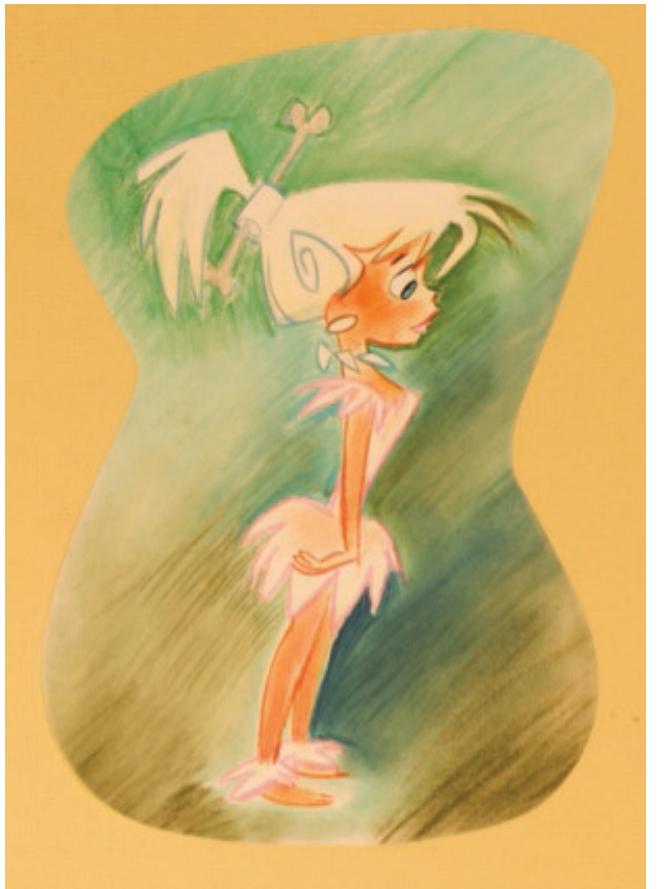
Perry Gunnite presentation art, 1985.
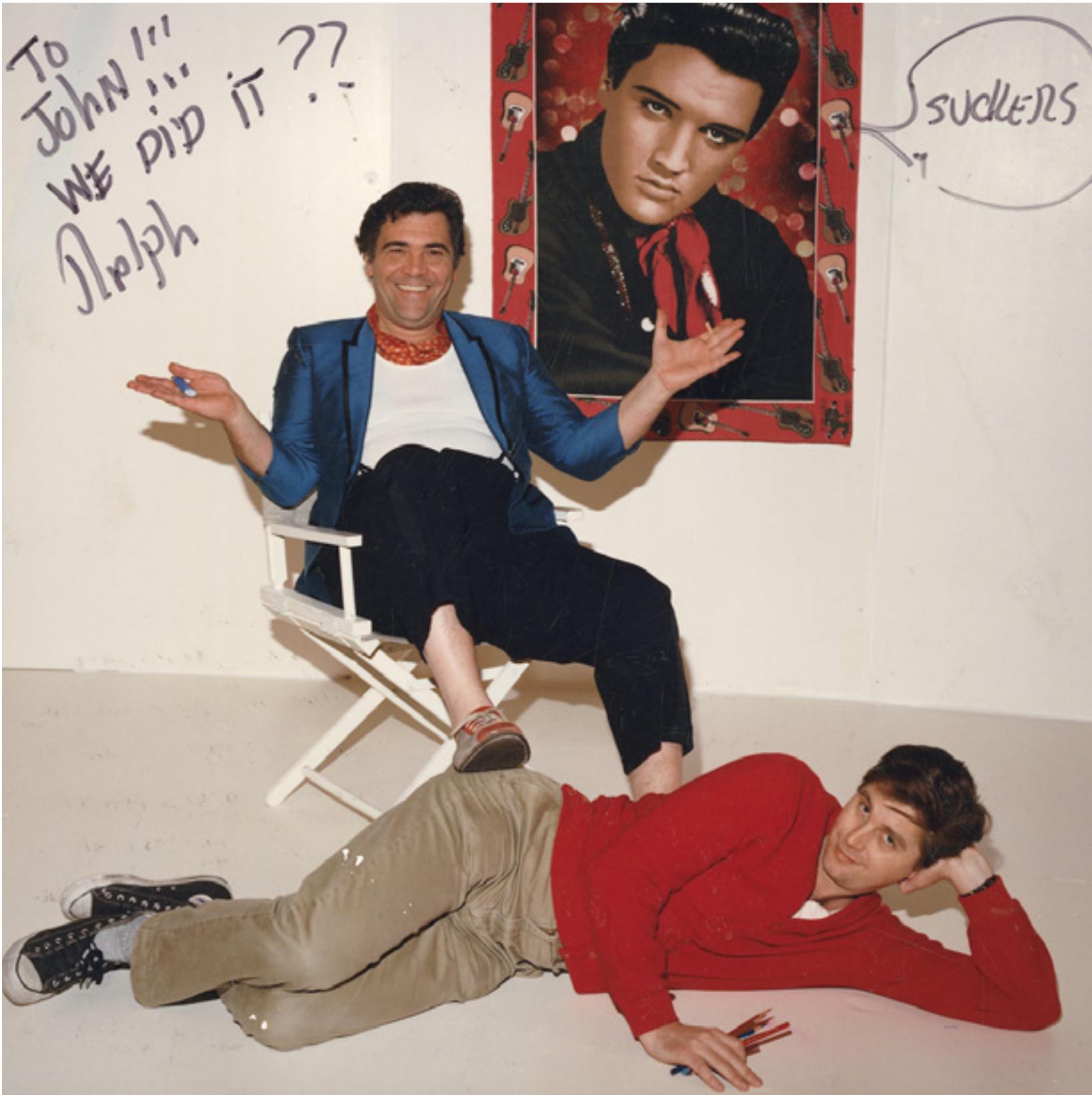
Ralph Bakshi

I fell into a deep depression after the *Perry Gunite* project was shut down in 1985; it felt like all the progress we had made on *The Jetsons* would never have the chance to develop further. The TV animation landscape was bleak out there, and I dreaded going back into production on some crappy Saturday-morning cartoon show again. I had had too much fun on *The Jetsons*, and gotten a taste of how things could be when cartoonists have more control over the creative elements of a cartoon.

On *The Jetsons*, all I really controlled was one department—layout—and that alone made a huge difference in the quality of the cartoons. I imagined what we could do if we wrote and directed the whole production ourselves, but that didn't look like it was ever going to happen again. I was thinking of getting out of the business altogether when one evening I received a mysterious call from the receptionist at Hanna-Barbera.

She said she had gotten a call from a friend of my father's, and that my dad was in the hospital. She couldn't give this guy my phone number without my permission though. I asked what the friend's name was. "Ralph," she said. I called home later that night. It was 5 A.M. in Ottawa, and dad answered all mad. "What the hell are you calling at five in the morning for?" I told him his friend Ralph had called and said he was sick in the hospital. Dad cursed me off the phone. I called back the receptionist at Hanna-Barbera and told her to go ahead and give Ralph my phone number.

50-50 Partners

The next day Ralph Bakshi, the director of *Fritz the Cat* and *Coonskin*, called me, all sheepish and apologetic. "It was the only way I could get them to gimme your phone number," he said in his thick variation of a Brooklynese accent. Then he told me he was coming out of retirement, and wanted to break into Saturday-morning cartoons. He wanted me to be his partner. "50-50, Johnny—you an' me all the way." He spent a long time sweet-talking me and trying to get me excited. Finally I agreed to meet with him. "Great!" he said, and then there was a pause before he hung up …

"Hey Johnny." "Yeah?" "Descwibe yourself to me." I did, and he said, "OK, that's you. See you tomorrow, asshole!" He had told me to find him a motel to stay at in Los Angeles, so I set him up at the Safari Inn, a cool motel from the 1950s with a huge African shield, that is a Burbank landmark.

This wasn't the first time I had worked with Ralph. In 1980, between Filmation stints, I was out of work and desperate, and heard that Ralph was hiring. He was trying to bring back short cartoons to movie theaters so I arranged to bring in my portfolio.

Ralph thought my drawings and gags were funny, and hired me on the spot. He gave me some story ideas he had written up, and asked me to turn them into scripts. I asked if I could draw them onto storyboards instead. He jerked up in his seat and shouted, "Storyboards? What is that, some Hollywood fag-shit?"

His main crew was finishing up work on *American Pop*, and they were all crammed into tiny offices together. Ralph set me up in the executive boardroom—a huge space with eight chairs, and lots of wall space. I started pinning up drawings based on a story idea of Ralph's, and three days later, Ralph stomped in, chewing his cigarette stub, followed by his team of loyalists marching in single file. They all had clipboards, ready to take notes. Ralph pushed me out of the way and looked closely at my storyboards. He started to chuckle and then spit out his stub. "This is gweat! This storyboard shit really works."

He then turned to his team and yelled, "Why the hell didn't you guys tell me about storyboards?" They all sunk into their shoulders and sputtered, "But we *did* tell you, Ralph. You yelled at us." So he yelled at them again and they scurried out of the room.

He slapped me on the back and said, "Fwom now on, we do it this way." I convinced Ralph to hire Eddie Fitzgerald so I could have another funny guy to work with. We were his heroes for a month. Then he let us go but promised we'd be back in "two weeks."

A year passed, and it was now 1981. I had finished working on Filmation's *Droopy* cartoons. I called up Ralph to see if he remembered me. He did and ordered me to get my ass right over to his studio.

This time, he was finishing *Fire and Ice*, the Frazetta-inspired movie, but he was anxious to get into live-action. He was working on the script for a *Star Wars* spoof called *Space Wars*. He wanted me to help write and gag it up. I asked if we could hire Tom Minton too, and he assented.

Shpae Waors

Ralph's assistant, Lynne Bettner, was typing up all
of Ralph's stream of consciousness ideas, and she kept
making the same typo over and over again. She would
spell *Space Wars* as "Shpae Waors." Tom and I decided
to call it that. Again, we were treated like the stars of the
studio, over and above the regular Bakshi crew, and, of
course, they weren't too happy about it. A month went
by, and Ralph gave us the "I'll see you in two weeks"
bit again. Fast-forward nearly five years when I got the
invitation to be Ralph's partner in Saturday-morning
cartoons.

Mihahn

For this new adventure with Ralph, he got us a space at
Steve Hahn's studio, MiHahn, in Sherman Oaks, where
they were making the Alvin and the Chipmunks feature
The Chipmunk Adventure with the son of Alvin creator
Ross Bagdasarian, Jr., and Ross Jr.'s wife Janice Karman.
We jumped right into developing ideas for TV shows, but
they weren't very kid-oriented. Ralph and I developed
ideas in the beginning. Then I got him to hire Lynne
Naylor, and then an ink-and-painter, Linda Gerlach.
It was a cozy little group, and we laughed a lot.

Ralph would sit in his chair backwards and slide up
behind me while I was drawing. His massive head
would rest on my shoulder as he directed my every
pencil stroke with coughs and grunts. If he didn't like
where I put a certain line, he'd interrupt with a scornful
guttural eruption, and my pencil would skid to a stop.
Finally, I asked Ralph to let me at least finish a rough
drawing before he grunted all over it. It was still fun and
educational, though, because Ralph made lots of creative
suggestions, and would rough out beautiful layouts
for us too. Ralph is a great, natural cartoonist, and loves
the whole process. He wants to witness every step
of the production. I had never experienced this kind of
enthusiasm working anywhere else.

Ralph wanted to do a prime-time cartoon series inspired by EC Comics. He wanted to make cartoon shorts about horror, crime, science fiction, and other genres, and wrap them around live-action segments starring himself. The live format was to be like *The Honeymooners* with Ralph living in a dingy apartment in a New York tenement building. He would be a struggling cartoonist who thinks he is on the verge of having his first big success, while his long-suffering wife constantly nags him to get a real job. Around 1986 Lynne Naylor and I designed these huge poster-sized presentation pieces to impress the TV executives. I had Ralph hire Tom Minton to help me write the stories and pitch bible. We called the show "Ralph Playhoel," but Ralph couldn't pronounce it and called it "Walph's Pwayhouth."

Chipmunk Adventure

The whole time we were doing these wacky-looking modern-styled presentations, the artists from the Chipmunk movie would come in and see how much fun we were having. We laughed all the time; there wasn't much laughing going on in the Chipmunk dungeon.

At first, we were all in one small room across the hall from a big office where every day, we'd see Janice with all her color stylists, telling them what her favorite shades of pink and purple were. We used to sneak in there at nights and look at what was on the walls. There were all these cels of semi-naked chipmunks on the walls, drawn and colored weird and disturbing. Instead of the little tufts of hair they had back when they were cartoon characters in the 1960s, they now had long, rude and fleshy tendrils growing out of their braincases. They were also evolving bits of realistic human anatomy here and there. They had smooth protruding bellies like starving African babies—with tender "outies."

Well, we all thought that what they had done to the Chipmunks was pretty mean to kids. They took a premise that was naturally cartoony and whimsical, and apologized for it by forcing it to make sense. I don't see how on earth you could ever make a cartoon about a full-grown man who keeps four-feet-tall singing chipmunks in his house to exploit their musical talents seem realistic, but that was the Bagdasarians' mission.

Their eighties TV show had stories like Alvin attending a human school where he pines for a human girlfriend and the other human kids get mad at him for it. "We don't tolerate inter-species relationships at *this* elementary school, buddy." Then the audience is expected to feel sympathy for the situation!

One day I overheard them discussing whether Alvin and the rest of the litter should have nipples or not, and the next morning everybody was sitting on the floor and picking the nipple colors in a very serious meeting.

Another odd thing about the studio were the tiny poo nuggets all over the floor. Mrs. Bagdasarian had a little dog that she loved dearly and not many others did. She treated the dog like it was a part of the management. The thing was probably in on the nipple-color decision-making sessions.

Harlem Shuffle

In the meantime, Ralph landed "Harlem Shuffle," a rock video for the Rolling Stones, so Steve Hahn gave him another office besides the one that we were already working in. I designed the look of the music video, and Ralph took the designs back to New York to build live-action sets in the style of the cartoon backgrounds while I stayed behind to direct the animation.

He put me in his new room with Bob Jaques to work on the animation while he was gone. Bob co-directed with me and we caused a lot of ruckus at MiHahn with our immature antics. Every day we came into work, there would be more cute little poos on the rug and they started to pile up.

When Ralph came back he discovered the tiny dumps and blew up. We calmed him down and said it would be funny to leave them all there until Steve, the owner of the studio, found them, and then Steve could have a nice fight with the Bagdasarians for posterity. Ralph agreed that that was a sensible plan, and it sure as hell worked. One day I came back from lunch and heard Ralph and someone else screaming about the poos. The door flew open and out shot a fistful of high-altitude brown jets.

"Harlem Shuffle" layouts, 1986.

"Harlem Shuffle" color key and production art, 1986.
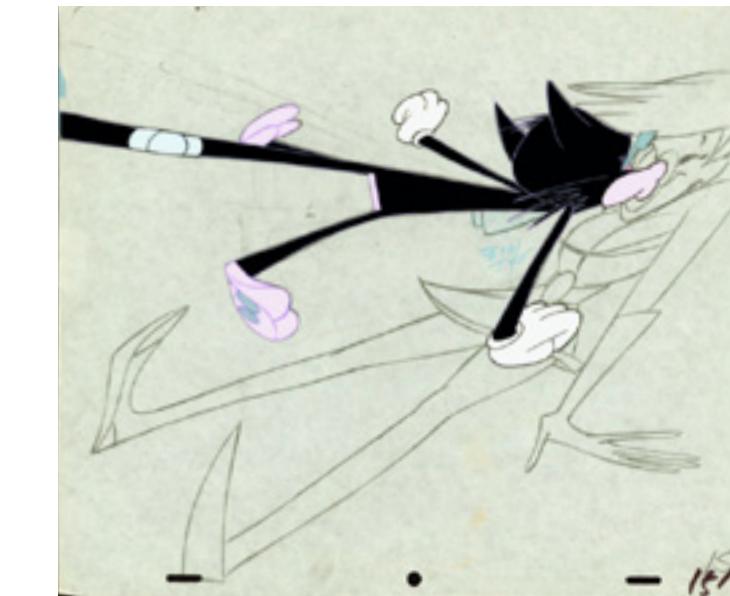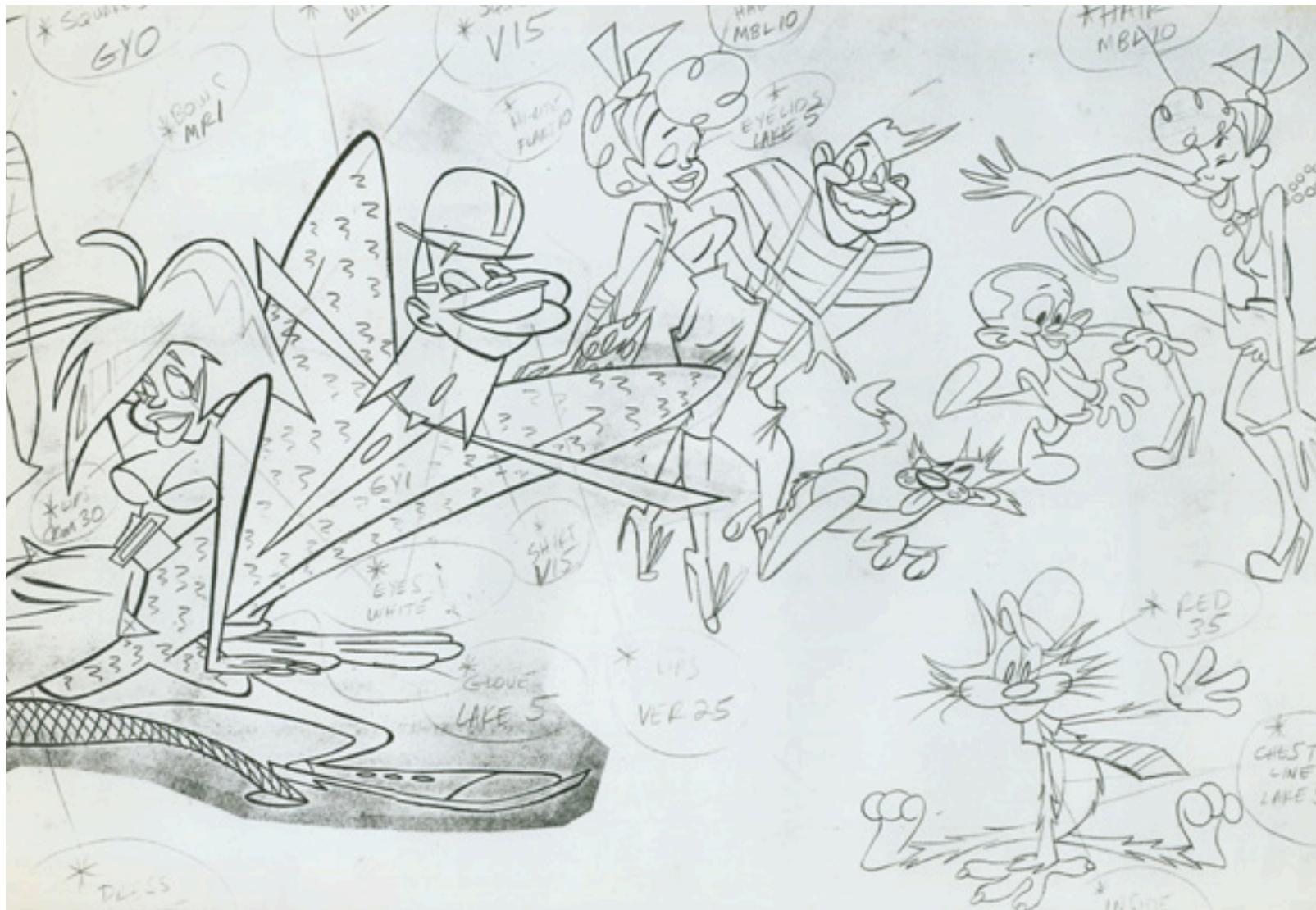
Oohoorids

There was also the infamous "Ohoorids Episode." Back when I was still in Ottawa, I'd worked at a local TV station as a cue-card holder. During one TV show, they'd altered a box of Cheerios to read "Ohoorids" to avoid being sued by General Mills. Remembering this, I asked our ink-and-paint girl Linda to take a box of Cheerios and alter the letters so we could have our very own box of delicious "OHOORIDS." Bob and I thought this was hilarious. Steve sent in his production manager one day to find out why Bob and I were laughing so hard and we showed him the OHOORIDS box. He didn't get it. The more he tried to figure out what was funny about it, the harder Bob laughed until he fell on the floor in a hysterical fit. This really irked the production manager, who stomped out in a huff to go fink on us.

Another time we poured the OHOORIDS on the floor and were rolling around in them and jumping up and down on them acting something out. The production manager told Steve, and he came in and saw the OHOORIDS dust all over his rug and blew a gasket— albeit a very conservative one. I was sitting at Ralph's desk when he came up and slowly put his tiny girl-like hands around my throat. (They didn't even reach all the way around.) "Sometimes you fellows confuse me so much I just want to harm you," he said. Of course, this display of contained fury drove Bob into another laughing fit.

Meeting Jim Smith

While working on the video, I was struggling to draw background scenes which I'm not good at and don't enjoy. I needed help. Henry Porch, who was then a production assistant for Steve Hahn, told me about how good his friend Jim Smith was and suggested I meet him. Jim was working at Marvel doing *G.I. Joe*–type cartoons, and I went over with Henry to meet him. The cartoons he worked on were horrendous, but his walls were plastered with his own drawings—fantastic caricatures of manly men like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Charles Bronson, and Lee Marvin—and powerful scenes of Conan the Barbarian, which he drew even more exaggerated than Frank Frazetta or John Buscema.

I loved Jim's drawings and asked him, "What are you doing working on crap like this for?" He looked up at me slowly, slightly confused. "What else is there?" he asked. "RALPH!" I said. Jim did background layouts on the Rolling Stones video at night, and it became the beginning of a long working relationship.

There were a handful of young animators who worked on the video, most of whom later became stars: Pat Ventura, Lynne Naylor, Frans Vischer, and Gary Paine, as well as one of Ralph's longtime animators, John Sparey.

Bobby's Girl

After the Rolling Stones video was completed, we moved into a little apartment above a dress shop on Ventura Boulevard. Ralph actually lived there for a time. We continued developing new ideas. This time we took one of the posters we made for *Ralph Playhoel* and developed it into a feature concept called *Bobby's Girl*. It was a teen movie that took place in a mythical 1950s milieu. I must have written twelve different scripts, because every day Ralph would throw out a whole sequence that he had thought was hilarious the day before.

It was maddening, but that's the way it was when you worked for Ralph. I managed to control his impulses better than most could, and it was still the only creative gig in town. Working for Ralph can actually be good for your creative growth if you realize what is happening. It teaches you the value of structure and control.

We also started storyboarding *Bobby's Girl* while I was writing the script. Lynne did some beautiful storyboards and designs for a pajama party sequence that featured super-cute, half-naked cartoon girls. Dave Spafford joined the crew, fresh from working on Don Bluth movies. He was an amazing artist who was sick of working on formulaic stuff and he drew some really funny storyboards.

Ralph kept taking our scripts to the executives at Tri-Star Pictures who were funding the development, and they always wanted us to make it more realistic. Eventually it got shelved. Too bad, it would have made a really unique, stylish, and funny film.

Ralph also got development deals from each Saturday-morning cartoon network—ABC, NBC, and CBS—who all pretended to be really excited about our ideas. We developed at least two series pitches for each network. One was a repurposed and toned-down version of *Bobby's Girl*. Tom discovered a young student, Jim Reardon, and we hired him right out of CalArts to help write gags for the shows with us.

Ralph pitched the shows to ABC and NBC, and everything was rejected. Only CBS was left and things were getting tense. By this time, Ralph had run out of money so he fired me under some pretense and partnered up with businessman John Hyde. They set up a studio in an industrial warehouse in North Hollywood and began plotting their next move.

Bobby's Girl Production art, 1986.

Some of my *Mighty Mouse* drawings, circa 1986.

Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures

Ralph had one last chance to make his comeback, and in 1986 he went to CBS ready to kill. There was one particular executive who had it in for us from the beginning, some curly-red-haired guy, but Ralph got along with the main executive, Judy Price. I wasn't there for the pitch, but this is the story Ralph told. He pitched the two shows we had developed for CBS, and the red guy tossed the story bibles on the table in front of Ralph, and said, "Ralph, we can't use any of this stuff." Then Ralph blew up, spitting his cigarette butt across the table. He accused them of never having any intention of buying our shows, and that they just wanted to keep us from selling them to the competition. Now everyone was terrified. They had awakened the monster.

Red Top, trembling and squeaking, made flimsy excuses. "But Ralph, we truly love this stuff. It's really funny. The problem is these are all *new* characters! They don't have 'marquee value.'"

Ralph bellowed "Mahkee value?! *Mahkee value*?!?! What the f— is mahkee value?"

Judy Price broke in and explained that networks couldn't run the risk anymore of buying original characters and concepts. Every new cartoon series had to be based on something the kids already recognized, like a popular toy, greeting card or ... a classic cartoon character. "Yeah Ralph, if you had an old character with marquee value, we'd buy that from you!" Curly Top said. Ralph said, "You want mahkee value? I'll give you mahkee value. I got the rights to a great character!" Everyone was cowering again. "Who do you have, Ralph?" Ralph's eyes bugged out and his jaw locked as he tried to come up with something. Turning purple, he all of a sudden spewed out, "Mighty Mouse! I got f—in' MIGHTY MOUSE!" Judy said, "OK, Ralph, we'll take it! Just don't eat us!" "Gweat!" Ralph slapped the portfolio shut. "We got a deal!"

He raced back to the studio and yelled at his partner (not me), "Find out who the f— owns Mighty Mouse! I just sold it to CBS." The next day, Ralph made a deal with Viacom, which ironically was owned by CBS, and Ralph came pounding on my door at seven in the morning. "Get dressed, asshole! You're a director now!

Our big time *Mighty Mouse* presentation piece.

The Presentation

We had one week until we had to present all our supposed development for the *Mighty Mouse* series to Judy Price. We scrambled to make one big presentation piece (drawn by Eddie Fitzgerald and beautifully inked on a cel by Libby Simon with a background painting by Phil Phillipson) and to write twenty-six story premises. The next week we acted out a bunch of stories for Judy. She waited till we wiped the sweat off our brows, then slapped her knee, and said, "I love it. Start production."

Ralph rushed her out the door and told me I was in charge. "Go out and hire forty artists." I called everyone I knew who was working at other studios and told them

we had a real cartoon to make. In a week, I had thirty-five artists in the studio. Jim Smith, Lynne Naylor, Bruce Timm, Eddie Fitzgerald, Bob Jaques, Ken Boyer, Byron Vaughns, Jim Gomez, Kent Butterworth, Jim Reardon, Mike Kazaleh, and Vicki Jenson, to name a few.

I also had gone to the latest CalArts Producer's Show (the year-end screening of films produced at the well-known animation school), and watched the latest batch of student films—most of which were the same films I saw there year in and year out. There was the cute baby that has sexual relations with the family pet, the dragon that metamorphoses into a young girl and then a butterfly, the epic remake of *Bambi*, and a couple other stock CalArts concepts.

I was, however, impressed by a small handful of students who didn't fit the mold, namely Jeff Pidgeon, Rich Moore, Ed Bell, and Nate Kanfer, who were all hired for the show. I also hired Andrew Stanton (the director of *Wall·E* and *Finding Nemo*), who had made a typically designed CalArts film, but the animation was very good. It reminded me of Red Ryder in the *Looney Tunes* short *Buckaroo Bugs*. Another student whose work caught my attention was Carole Holliday, who drew in a classic 1940s Disney style, and I hired her for character design.

Ralph brought in a bunch of his old cohorts—some really serious animators who hated fun almost as much as they hated us. He was also worried about letting a bunch of cartoonists write all the stories, so he hired what he called a "real writer," a nice guy named Doug Moench who wrote super hero comics—and super hero dialogue, which is a language not recognized by most English-speaking people.

About seventy-five percent of the crew was itching to try new things and finally have some say in the creative part of making cartoons. Ralph tried to get Judy to let us write on storyboards, but that was too radical for her. She wanted scripts, but at least we cartoonists got to write the scripts! Tom Minton, Jim Reardon, Eddie Fitzgerald, Doug Moench, and I wrote the bulk of the scripts. We all collaborated with each other and helped gag up the stories. I acted as the story editor on as many stories as I had time for.

This, in itself, was a huge revolution in how cartoons were made. Usually the scripts are written by people who can't draw, have no interest in animation, and are just using the job as a stepping-stone to get a live-action gig. Animation does not attract "real writers." Instead it creates "writers-for-hire" who are basically used-car-salesmen types that keep the dirty artists away from the executives and deliver what the execs expect, which are stale, formulaic stories that have already been told a million times.

We, on the other hand, wrote about *anything* we thought was funny; we created all kinds of new characters, tried new plot constructions, and most of all, took advantage of the fact that we could finally use visual humor. We broke every rule that existed in Saturday-morning cartoons because we could.

We also changed the way cartoons looked. By the 1980s, every cartoon was purposely drawn without any sense of design or appeal. They were all bland and faceless. Characters had flesh-colored eyes, realistic proportions, and never made expressions.

Dance of Pain

I especially liked Jeff Pidgeon's character designs for the show. He drew very cartoony, but his work had a modern look. His characters were fun and stylish at the same time—a rare combination.
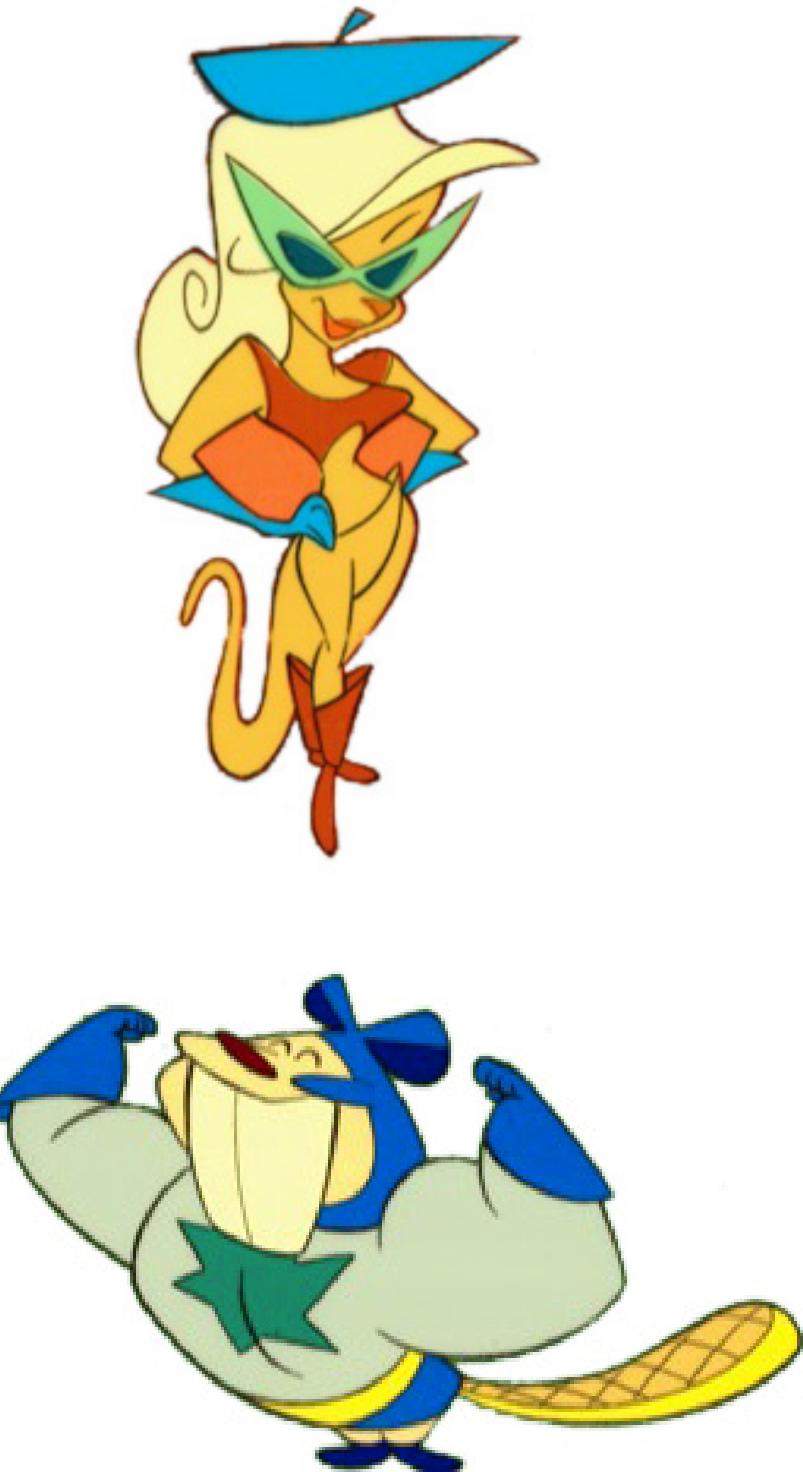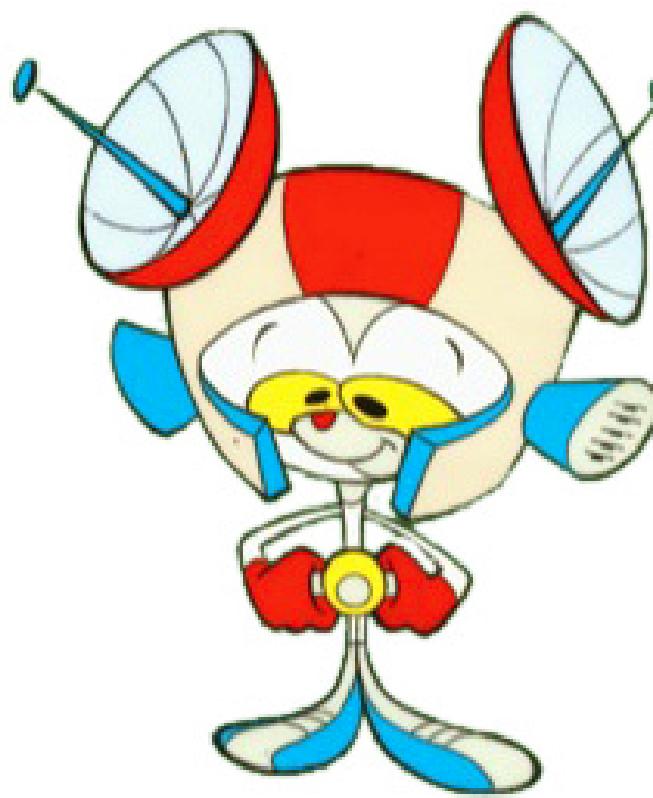
More *Mighty Mouse* character designs, circa 1986.

Poor Warner Bros. Imitation

"Me-Yowww!" was the first time I supervised every creative aspect of a cartoon—except the final editing. I had never had so much control, but I quickly learned that you really only have as much control as you have skill, experience, and knowledge. My only previous experience with partial direction had been a couple years earlier on *The Jetsons* episode "Hi-Tech Wreck." We had a lot of fun drawing "Me-Yowww!" It was full of lively, cartoony poses, and we were lucky enough to have Dave Marshall oversee the animation in Taipei. He did his best to ensure that the animators actually used our poses. Even so, when we watched the animation on the Moviola in Bakshi's studio, we were pretty disappointed. I thought Ralph was gonna fire me for sure. It didn't seem to play. The timing was mushy. The voices sounded weak and unsure, and the gags seemed dated and quaint. It seemed to me like a fake Warner Bros. cartoon rather than a new original style, though I was probably harder on it than anybody else. Working on *Mighty Mouse*, with Ralph's support, experience, and a real director/unit system, we
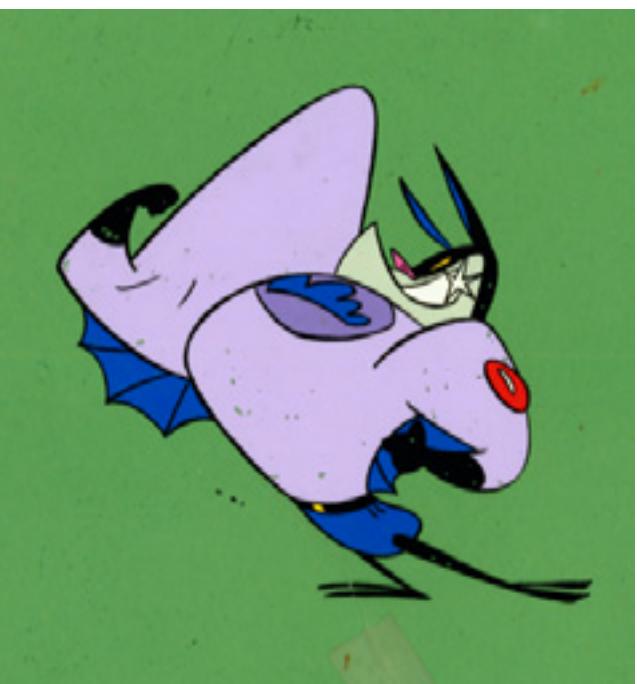
were able to learn from our mistakes and improve as we practiced our craft.

The episodes that I felt were most successful and had the most control, structure, and confidence of execution were "Night on Bald Pate," "Night of the Bat-Bat," and "Mighty's Benefit Plan." Each of these stories explored characters and their personalities, and it was the character and emotion that was the most fun thing for me to direct.

Elwy and the Tree Weasels

Bob Jaques and I were having lunch and talking about his adventures working on the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* feature when we hatched the idea for "Mighty's Benefit Plan," a cartoon that lampooned the Chipmunks. We wanted to explain to the world why a full-grown man was exploiting lower life-forms by forcing them to sing. We filled it with in-jokes about the Alvin movie production. We were laughing our heads off in the car on the way back from lunch, never for a moment thinking that we could make such an audacious cartoon. I pitched it to Ralph for fun, and he laughed and said, "Make the goddamn picture!" I assigned the story to Jim Reardon, who wrote the script.

A scene begins, like this one for our viscious Chipmunks lampoon, which aired in 1987, with a script. The script is then translated into the storyboards on the following page, and finally to layouts on the page after that.
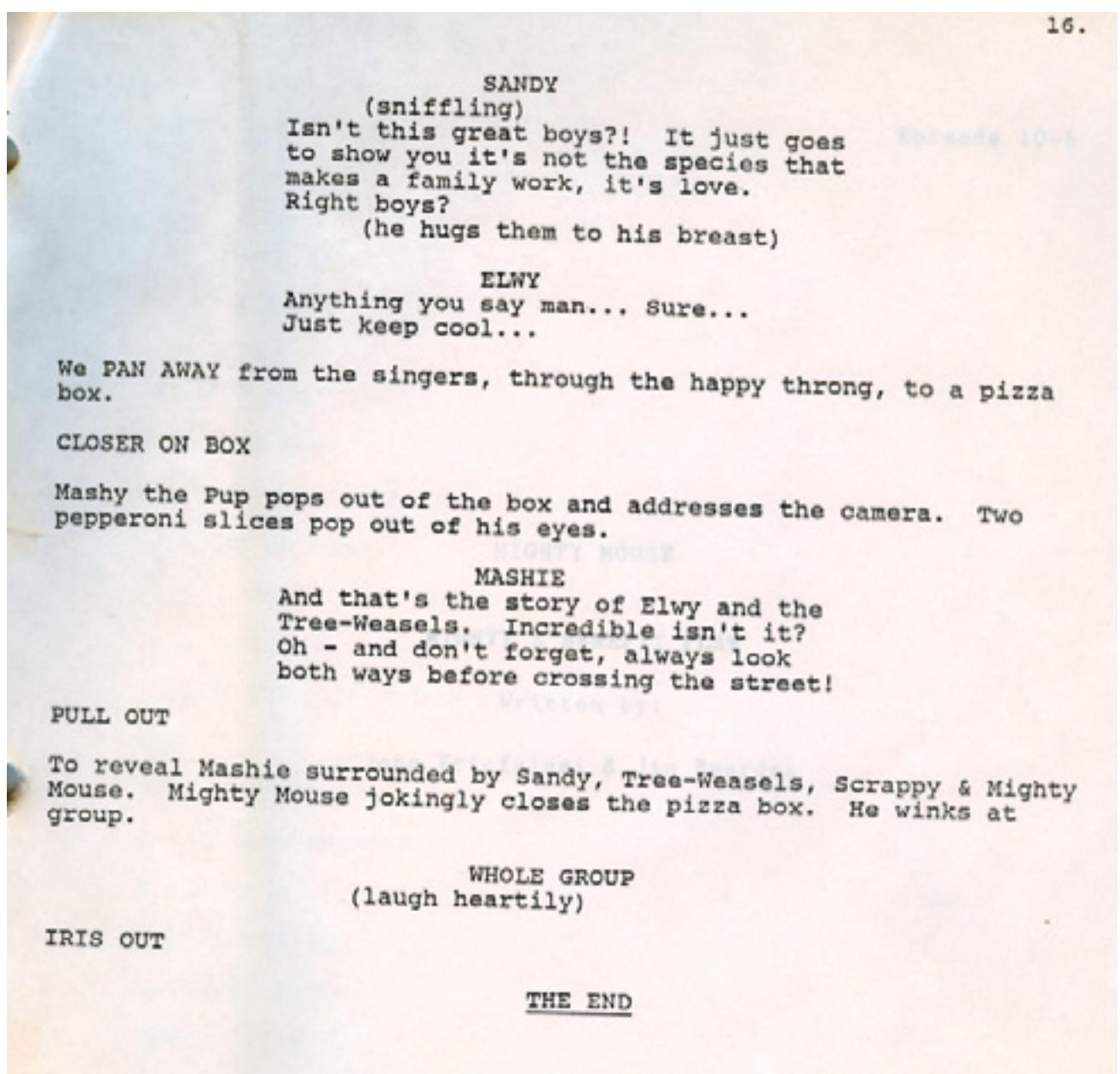
action
Sandy has his arm around Elwy.

dialogue
SANDY
(sniffling)
Isn't this great boys?!

action
They are taking in the spectacle.

dialogue
SANDY:
It just goes to show you

action
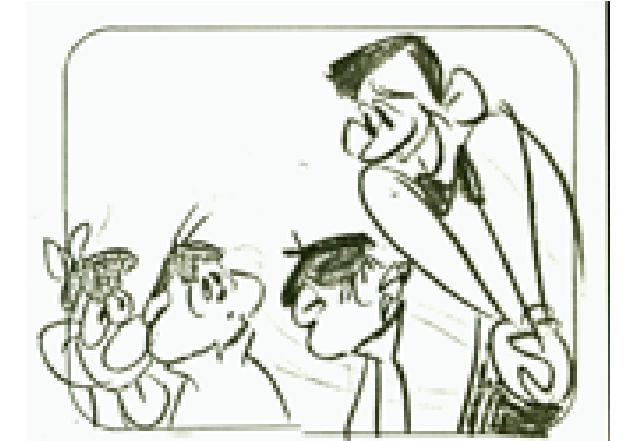
dialogue
SANDY: it's not
the species that makes a family work,

action

dialogue
SANDY:
it's love.

Bryan Vaughn's Mighty Mouse
storyboards

My layouts based on
Bryan's boards.

Scrappy.

Polly Pineblossom.

Bruce Timm's Kirk Douglas.

Pathos

From the beginning of production, Ralph wanted to take some of the edge off of what we were doing in order to make Judy Price feel like she was being responsible to the kiddies. Ralph's edict was, "We need heart! More heart, guys. Make the little bastards cry." That's why Ralph invented Scrappy, an orphaned mouse character we all hated and kept abusing in the stories.

Tom Minton came up with a real tearjerker, "The Littlest Tramp," about little Polly Pineblossom, a poor orphan girl-mouse who sold flowers on the street. (Tom and I had a running gag where we would create characters whose names were difficult to pronounce to see how creative Ralph could get with them. He had enough trouble with Tom and John. Once at a retrospective of his films, he recited to Leonard Maltin the heartwarming story of Piney Poontang as tears welled up in his eyes.) Big Murray was the cartoon's villain, whose mission in life was to be mean to Polly and crush her flowers so she would continue to starve. I turned him into a caricature of Kirk Douglas.

Mighty Mouse would keep showing up after Murray had done something mean to Polly, and he would threaten to go after Murray and punish him. But Polly always stopped Mighty and beckoned him to go help someone "less fortunate." At the end, Murray repents, and he and Polly get married. As Jim Gomez and I were drawing the layout to the final scene of the cartoon, where Murray and Polly drive off into a glorious sunset, we were feeling guilty for giving the story such a happy ending. Jim said, "Let's blow them up!" So we did. And it left a big hole in the street ... and in our hearts. This cartoon was a throwback to mid-1930s cartoons that were designed to make kids cry. This was the first time I had the chance to direct a cartoon that made fun of pathos while still raising lumps in people's throats. It's been a staple technique of mine ever since.

Layouts for the Big Murray meets Polly Pineblossom scene.

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Getting Fired

As I was finishing the exposure sheets for "Mighty's Benefit Plan," the last episode of the first season, Ralph came to look over my shoulders. He nudged me and said, "Hey Johnny, you're just pretending that those sheets mean something, right? It's to impress people, isn't it?" Ralph was suspicious of exposure sheets, because they're complicated charts that are hard to read if you don't use them every day. He thought they were some pretend invention to make the directors appear intellectual—or maybe witchcraft. But in case what I was doing was actually useful to the production, he impatiently waited for me to finish up the last sheet instructions. As soon as I did, he snatched them up and fired me.

But I was back again soon, developing more show ideas for him—*Snow White and The Motor City Dwarfs*, *The Jetstones*, and other concepts. This was 1988, between the first and second season of *Mighty Mouse*, and during this stint Ralph and I had another fight about something or other. When the opportunity came to produce new episodes of *Beany and Cecil*, I decided not to go back to *Mighty Mouse* for a second season, even though I loved what we had accomplished on the show. When I watched the second season of *Mighty Mouse*, I saw many of the concepts and ideas I had developed for other shows adapted for the new episodes.

In the middle of that second season, while I was working on *Beany*, we heard on the radio that Reverend Donald Wildmon had caught Mighty Mouse snorting cocaine in "The Littlest Tramp." It was a ridiculous claim. Mighty Mouse was sniffing a crushed flower—and it was a red flower. I should know because I drew that scene. Shortly after that, *Mighty Mouse* was cancelled. I don't know if that was the actual reason, or if the ratings just weren't that great. More than likely, it was a combination of factors.

Doing Disney, 1988.
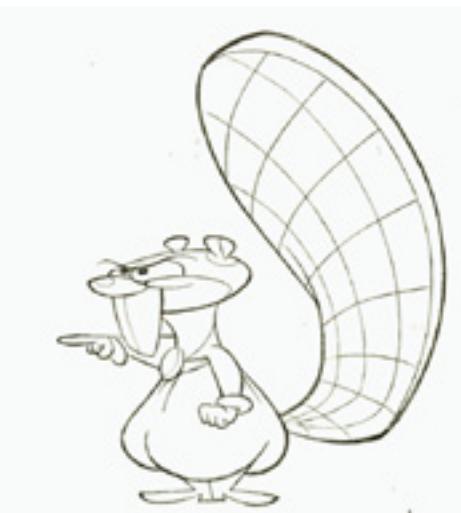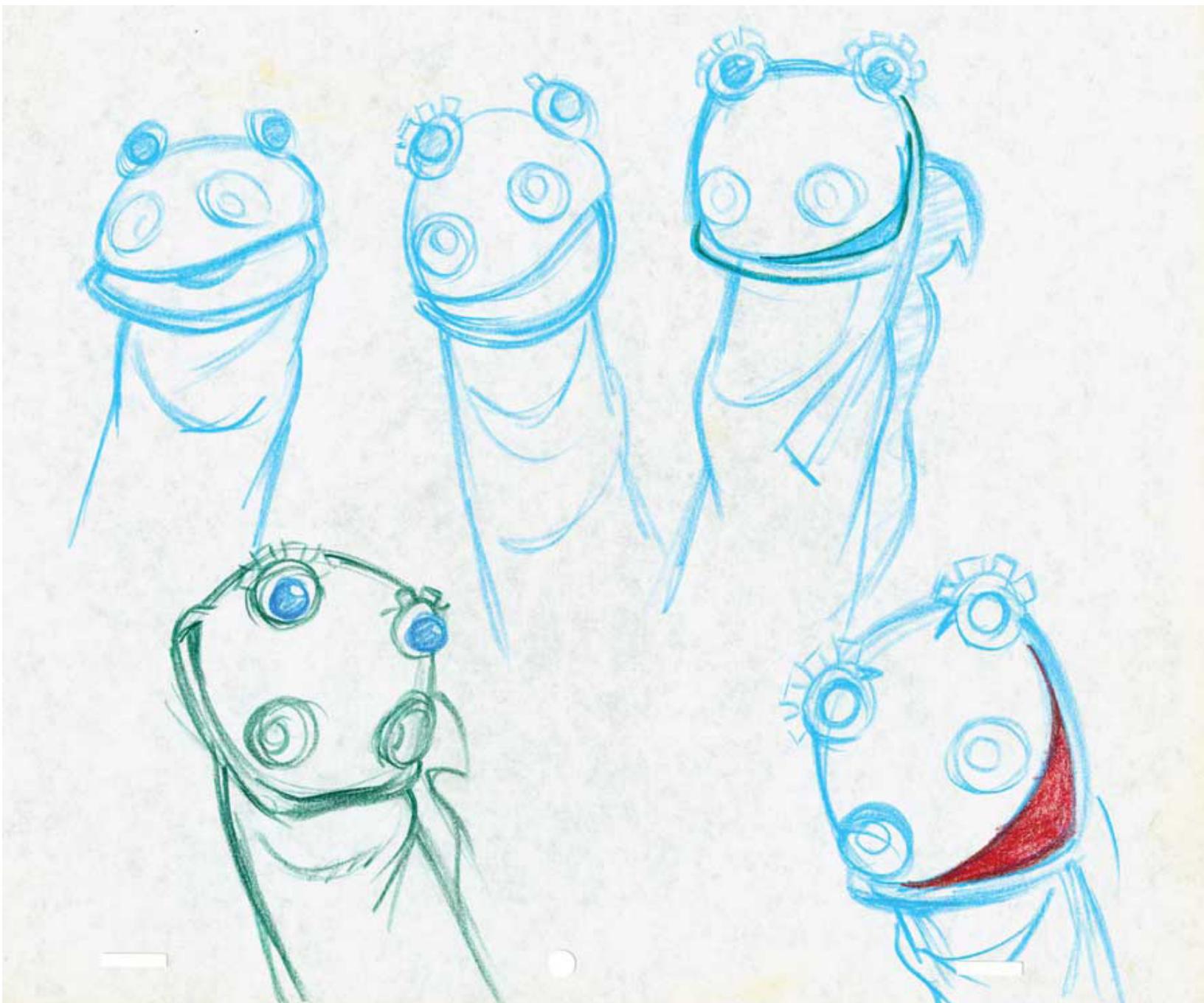
These are my studies of the original Beany and Cecil puppets from the 1950s live show "Time For Beany".

Beany and Cecil

Sody Development

When Sody Clampett started to plan a revival of *Beany and Cecil* for Saturday mornings in 1988, she asked me if I would work on developing it with her. This was a dream opportunity! Bob Clampett, who passed away in 1984, was my all-time hero for the work he did on *Looney Tunes* in the thirties and forties. He also created *Beany and Cecil*, originally a puppet show and later a TV cartoon that I watched when I was a kid.

On the original TV series, Bob had severe limitations, compared to his glory days at Warner Bros. the budgets were very low, probably even lower than Hanna-Barbera's. Bob also didn't have a team of top animators like his amazing Warner Bros. crews—no Robert McKimson, Rod Scribner, Manny Gould, Bill Melendez, Chuck Jones, Bobe Cannon or the like.

What he lacked in resources, he made up for in imagination. The *Beany and Cecil* show was the most imaginative TV cartoon ever. It ran in the after school slot right next to *Huckleberry Hound*, *Yogi Bear* and *Quick Draw McGraw*—all of which I loved. But even as a kid, I thought the *Beany and Cecil* cartoons were extra weird. They were full of musical sequences, strange surreal lands, crazy characters, and lots of liberal cartoon license.
It wasn't always funny, but it was full of surprises and it looked good.

The original show's main designer was Willie Ito, a young cartoonist with a strong, appealing style that was heavily influenced by Chuck Jones, for whom Willie had done layouts in the late 1950s.

Frames from Clampett's original Beany and Cecil cartoon, 1959–1967

Artists Can't Write

Sody was eager to begin. She asked me to find a writer to write something for me to draw. "I can write the outlines," I told her. "No, no, I mean a real writer," she said. Then she asked me, "Who wrote Mighty Mouse?" When I told her I was the main writer, she looked at me quizzically, as if I was some kind of kook, and said, "But John, you're an artist, not a writer."

I tried explaining to her that all the old cartoons were written by cartoonists, but she wouldn't have it.
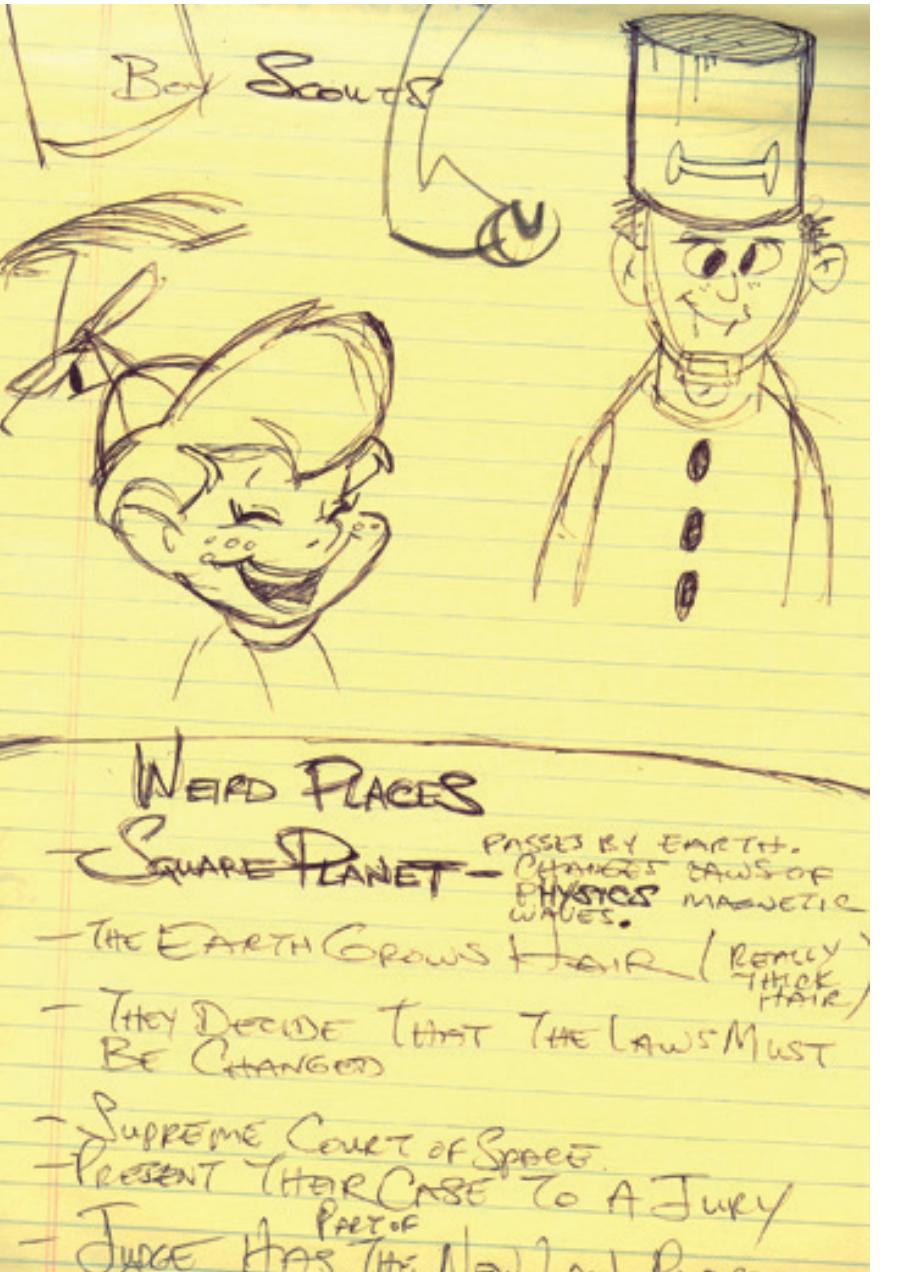
Then I thought of the perfect example. "Who wrote *Beany*?" I asked innocently. "Bob did," she said. "Well, wasn't Bob an artist?" I asked. "Well yes, but that's different. He was Bob."

So I called up Tom Minton and asked if he wanted to work on the presentation of *Beany and Cecil* with me. Sody accepted Tom as a writer after I warned him not to let her know he could draw. Tom and I came up with lots of stories for *Beany and Cecil* to pitch to Sody.

Huffenpuff's Braggart's Club

I remember pitching a particular cartoon about every kid's favorite cartoon homosexual, Captain Huffenpuff— "Uncle Captain" as he was known on the show—who was Beany's guardian in the show and the supposed authority figure. He was a loveable blowhard, who took credit for everything, but always dove into his cabin, labeled "Hiding Room," whenever any danger showed up.

My story took place in The Blowhard Lodge. The lodge brothers were putting on a stage show and each blowhard would get up and tell tall tales of his heroic deeds. The one who had the most unbelievable exaggerated tale would win an award. Of course, I had Uncle Captain come up with the tallest of tall tales about what a brave hero he was, but then at the end of the story, he gets scared by a mouse and hides under a lamp.

I pitched this storyline with great verve to Sody and she tried not to laugh, but let out some involuntary giggles here and there. "That must be one of Tom's jokes!" she said. At the end of the pitch, Sody complimented me on my performance, but rejected the story. When I asked why, she explained, "It's a funny story, but you don't understand the characters, John. Captain Huffenpuff isn't a coward!"

My early *Beany and Cecil* notes, circa 1988.

Sold to DiC

Sody and Robert Clampett Jr. went around the networks to sell the project. As I remember it took a few months because I didn't hear from Sody for a while. Then, in spring 1988, I got a call from Richard Raynis, the head of production at DiC, the worst cartoon studio in existence at the time.

Richard told me they were on the verge of making a deal to put a new *Beany and Cecil* series on the ABC Saturday morning block. He knew all about Mighty Mouse and liked it, and asked if I wanted to produce the show. Part of his reasoning was that not only did I love and understand Clampett better than anyone else, but that I had a team of cartoonists who were eager to work on the next production I did.

The trick was for Richard to convince both Sody and the ABC executives that I was the man for the job. Richard is a very diplomatic guy, and he somehow managed to put it all together. It was agreed that I would run the show creatively, in concert with the Clampetts, ABC, DiC management, the voice-over director, and worst of all . . . the *story editor*.

You would think that after *Mighty Mouse*, the making of *Beany and Cecil* would have been an easy follow-up but it was doomed from the start.

ABC Execs
and the Notes Begin

First of all, the Clampetts and the ABC execs didn't get along. They each had a different idea of what Bob's show was about. The Clampetts basically wanted it to be true to the spirit of Bob's creation (even though Captain Huffenpuff would have to be brave now) and the execs, like all execs, wanted to update it and ruin everything. They wanted to add skateboards, rock music, and anything else that didn't belong. They also told me, "None of that *Mighty Mouse* crap," on the side.

The very first meeting in DiC owner Andy Heyward's boardroom was extremely tense. I tried to be as diplomatic as possible towards everybody, in the hopes that we could take some steps forward from our experience on *Mighty Mouse*. I wanted to build upon what we had learned. I offered up the idea of eliminating scripts altogether and going back to writing on storyboards, the same way the original *Beany and Cecil* episodes were written.

Jennie Trias and Jeff Holder, the ABC execs, were aghast at the suggestion. They already had a story editor in mind that would be perfect for the show, but he was hard to get. Chuck Lorre was demanding top dollar and the right to compose all the music too! Composing music is the only way to get royalties working on a cartoon. Animation writers, unlike those in live-action, are merely "work for hire." Their salaries are way higher than the artists, but that isn't enough for them. They think they deserve royalties, as if their input has something to do with the longevity of the dreadful cartoon shows they script. In reality, most cartoon writers, at least the ones who executives like, are interchangeable, and the shows remain as uninspired as ever, no matter who writes the formulaic scripts. The writers are there to serve as buffers between the executives and the cartoonists, who they despise. But all the writers do their best to write songs into the shows, whether they are musicians or not, so they can get their royalties.

We were starting production late in the season and therefore it was important to get some stories going fast. ABC convinced their chosen one, Chuck Lorre, to start writing, with the promise that he would also get to compose the music.

I hired a core crew, mostly from *Mighty Mouse*, to start designing the show, while Lorre and I started talking about stories. He was disgruntled that I had anything to say about them at all. I tried to appeal to his common sense and suggested that he didn't script things into the show that couldn't be animated, like big crowd scenes and huge spectacles. I would ask him to tell me the stories he was thinking about, and then add my own jokes and try to get him to put them in. We had some philosophic discussions on the theories of comedy; we both agreed that we liked Monty Python, but his interpretation of it was not applicable to cartoons. The only reason Lorre talked to me at all was because the Clampetts told the executives that we should all work together and be a happy family. All Lorre really wanted to do was get the scripts out as fast as possible so that he could start composing some stock music on his Casio.

I had more luck with Richard Raynis. He was sympathetic towards cartoonists having been an artist himself before becoming DiC's production head. Richard went to bat for me by allowing us to do layouts in the studio, which was unheard of at the time. In fact, no one at DiC even knew what a layout was! They made storyboards and shipped them to fifty countries around the world, and then magically, finished colored episodes would appear back in the States. As far as DiC was concerned, the creativity in a cartoon all happened upfront, in the script and storyboard. Everything after that—including the animation—was filling in the gaps.

We had to build animation desks from scratch to bring into the studio. Everyone marveled at these strange looking desks with a big hole in the center of each. Richard was also all for the artists adding visual gags into the storyboards. Even Robbie Clampett was somewhat supportive of this, unlike the execs and Lorre. There were lots of fights in Andy's boardroom over this outrage of letting cartoonists draw things funny. Jennie and Jeff would start at one end of the table and chew out each person in the room, one at a time—including the Clampetts, me, the directors, Richard, and even Andy, who owned the studio and was putting the whole thing together.

Jeff was a pudgy, flesh-colored-all-over man in a too tight suit. His hair was flesh colored too, and he didn't have eyebrows. Have you ever known one of those fat kids whose fingers taper to points, and the knuckles are innies? This was Jeff, a full-grown man that looked like a twelve-year-old nerd. When Jeff was chewing you out, he would point his pudgy, hairless fingers within an inch of your face. He did this to everybody while his boss, Jennie, looked on with hateful satisfaction, her huge nostrils flaring outward and snorting the whole time. She was also prone to screaming. I mean really screaming, blood curdling screams.

One time she got so mad at Sody Clampett that she walked into the closet by herself, shut the door, and then screamed at the top of her lungs. The whole room shook. She came out, purple in the face, grabbed Jeff and stomped out of the room, pointing and cursing the whole time. She turned around to face Sody, and said, "Youuu, youuuuu did this to me ..." Then she got on the elevator with the pink man and disappeared.

What had enraged her so much? We had shown her the animated title sequence for the show and we had the audacity to put Bob Clampett's name in the title sequence, like in the original show when Beany and Cecil would sing "A Bob Clam-PETT Carttooo-ooooon!"


Our version of the nefarious Cubby's lips, which was deemed too gross.
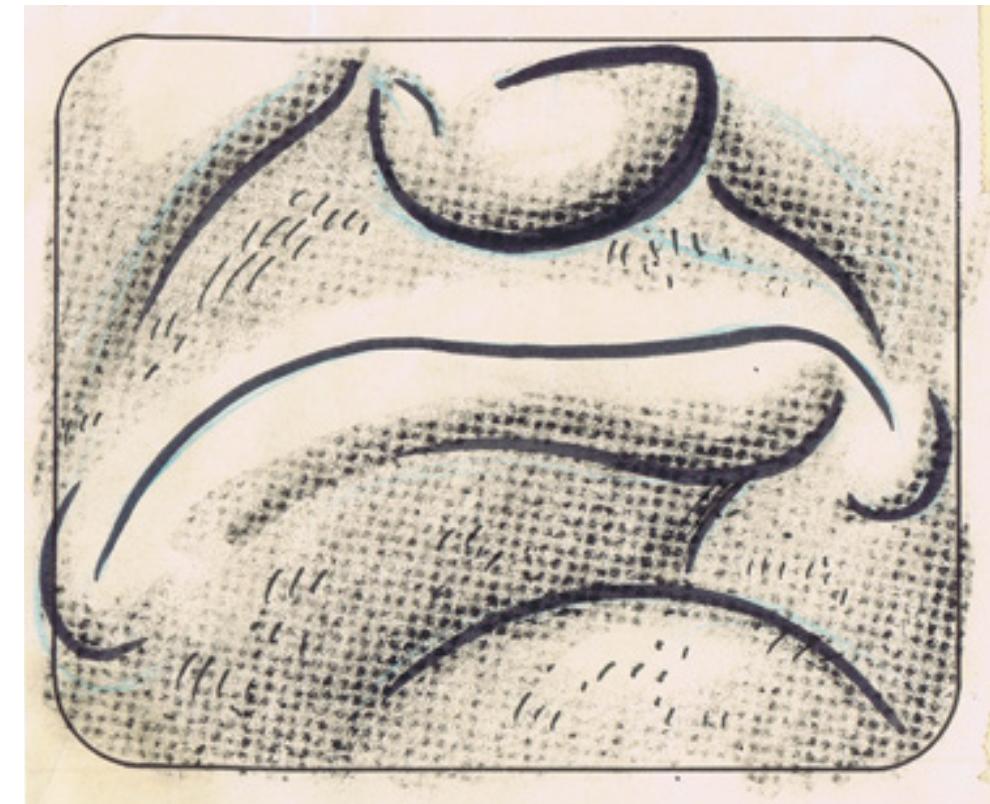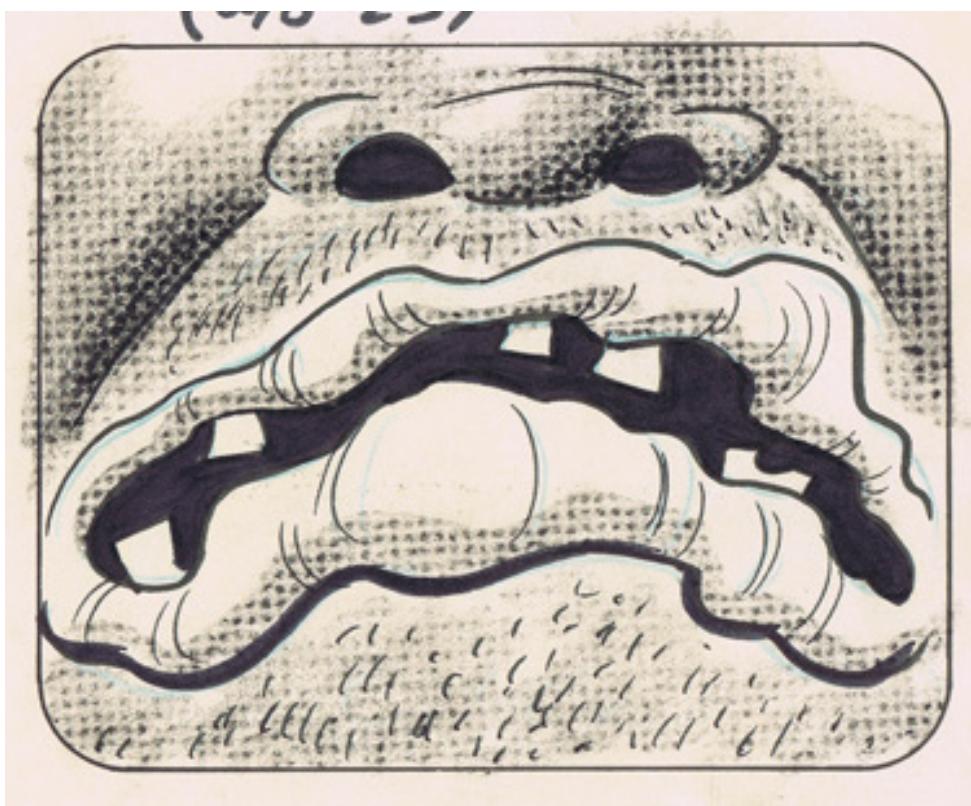
Their version of Cubby's lips. They won.

Another Great Crew

Despite the issues with the executives we ended up with a very talented crew, and everyone was eager to draw funny cartoons. It was a mixture of Mighty Mouse alumni and the latest batch of CalArts kids. Eddie Fitzgerald and I were directing, Jim Smith did storyboards and layouts, and directed at least one episode.
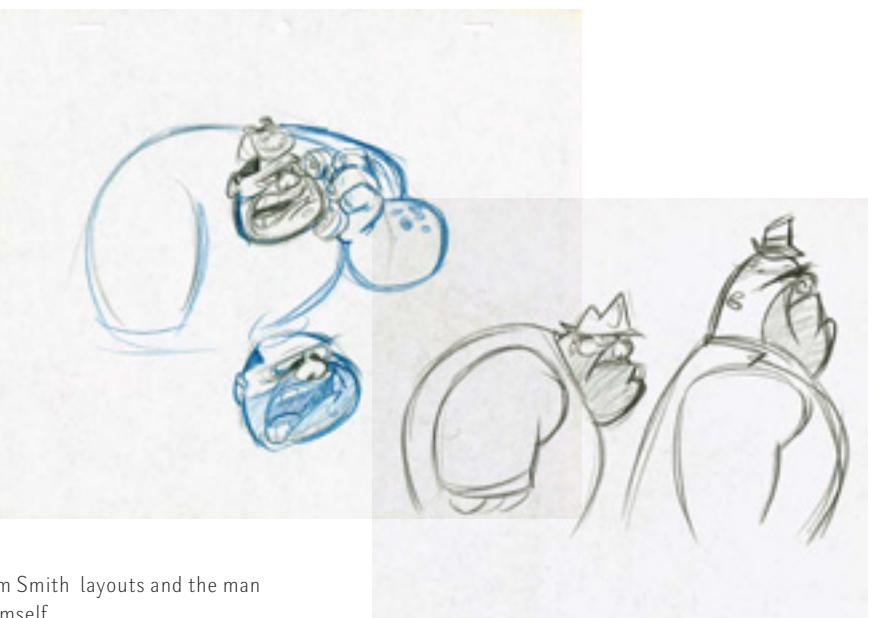

Jim Smith layouts and the man himself.
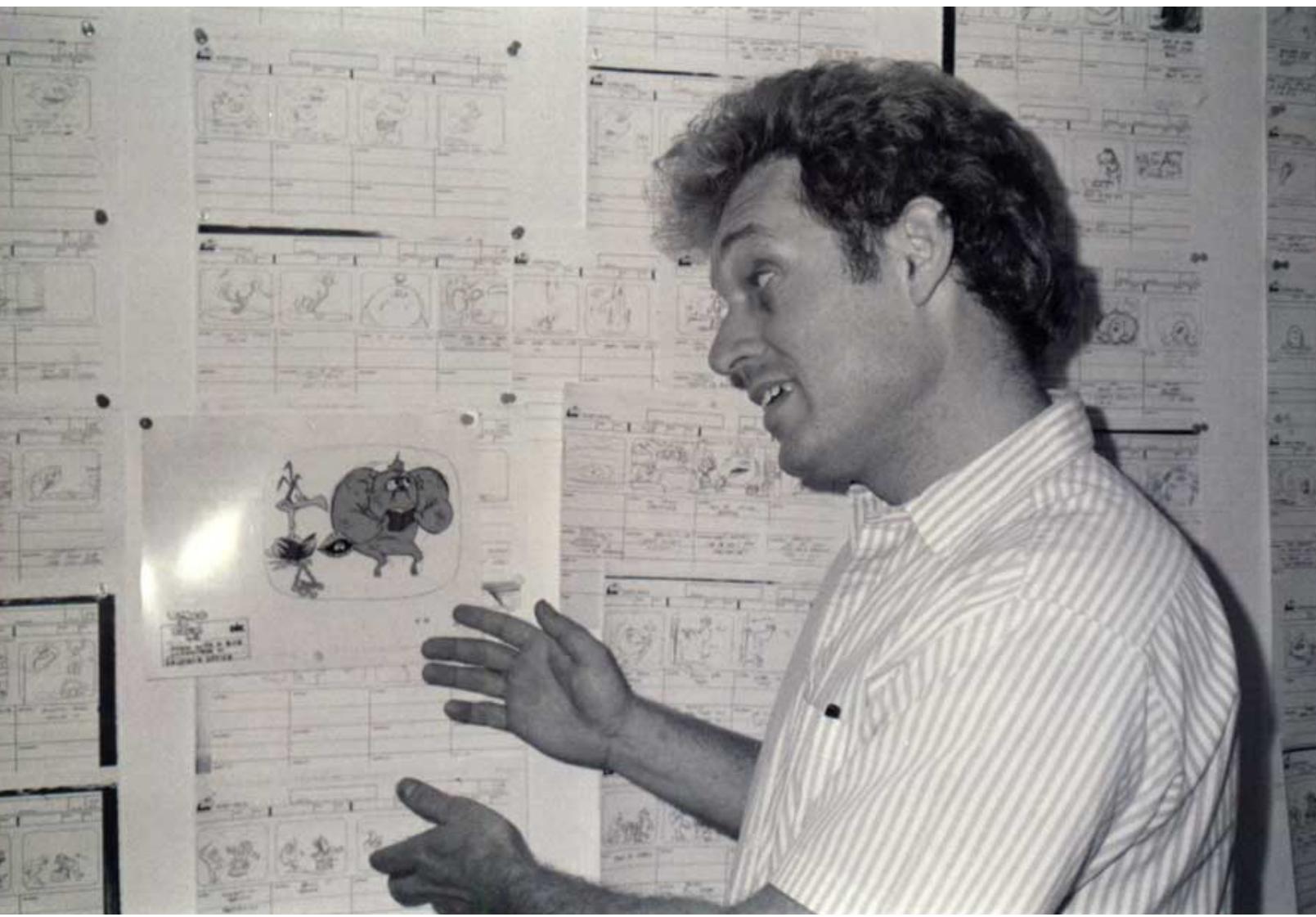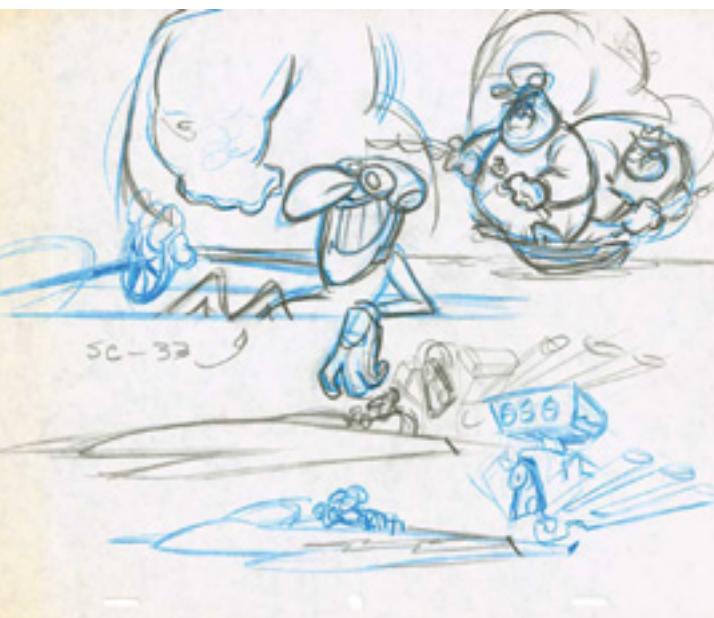
Lynne Naylor (whose drawings are below) did a little bit of everything, including some beautiful layouts. Bill Frake did layouts and some directing. Mike Lah of MGM fame even wrote some exposure sheets. Bruce

Timm (who later co-created and produced Batman: The Animated Series) did his first storyboards on *Beany and Cecil*, and I swear they were the only things that the ABC execs liked about the show.

Bruce Timm would ink all his panels with thick clean bold lines, making them look almost like comic books. A lot of gags went through on Bruce's boards, (samples of which are below) that wouldn't have on the others, just because Bruce made everything look so pretty. I hired Dave Wasson, Mike Kim, Don Shank, and Rich Arons from the CalArts animation program.

We also discovered new talent from around the country, like Chris Reccardi, Mike Fontanelli, Bob Miller, and Ken Mitcheroney. Great animators Rebecca Rees and Dan Haskett did some lively layouts too, while Laura Lizak and Cristy Maltese painted some very stylish backgrounds.
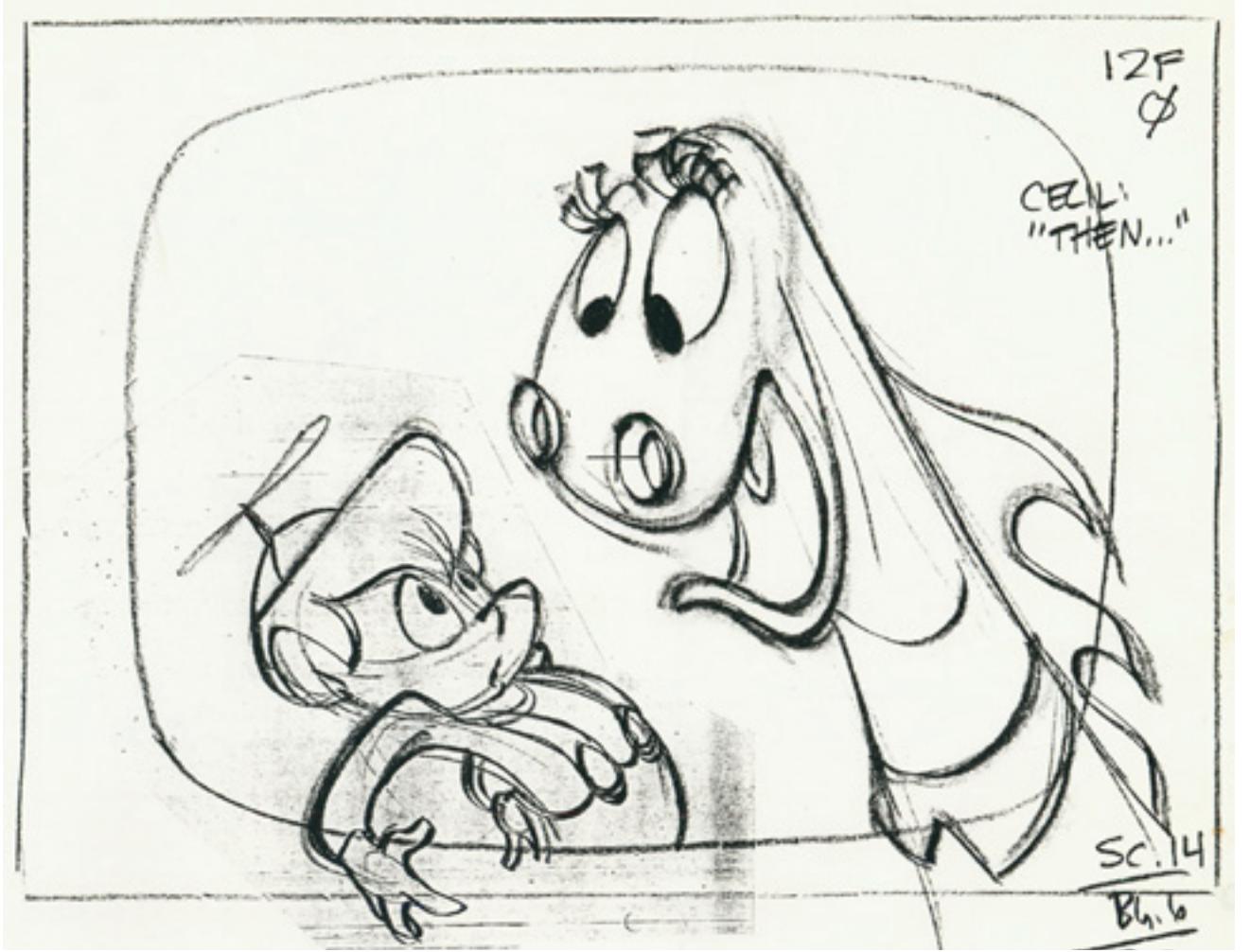
Mike Kim layout drawing, circa 1988.

Billy West

The *Beany and Cecil Show* was the first time I worked with Billy West. The Clampetts discovered Billy doing vocal impressions on a radio show out east and brought me a tape of his funny voices. I loved it. For some reason, I was allowed to conduct the auditions for voice talent even though the network was planning to use a "voice director" to actually direct the voices on the episodes. Billy came to audition and we hit it off right away. He liked all the same classic comedy and cartoons that I did, and could do just about any type of character I asked for.

After he nailed Cecil's voice, we got to talking about *The Three Stooges*. He did a Curly impression, which got me laughing, and then I said, "You know, I bet there's no one on earth who could do Larry." And then he did a perfect Larry: "Leave 'im alone!" I fell off my chair. Billy was hired to do Cecil and many incidental characters. I eventually cast him as a nutty squirrel or gopher or something who had Larry Fine's voice, but that cartoon never got produced.

Maurice LaMarche, who later voiced the Brain in *Pinky and the Brain*, came in and did a good Dishonest John impression and got hired for the role. My favorite voice on the original series was Jimmy MacGeorge's Captain Huffenpuff. He had that hilarious, creepy laugh between every line that always cracked me up. Lucky for us, Jimmy was still alive and available. The networks wanted someone new and hipper to fill the role, but the Clampetts and I fought for Jimmy and he was great, a real pro. The networks insisted we use a little boy to do Beany's voice.

At some point, early on, we all got to hear Chuck Lorre's music. No one liked it. Not the Clampetts, not the artists, not Rich Raynis, no one except Chuck and the execs liked it. As I remember, the Clampetts refused to use it, which led to Lorre quitting and the execs hating everyone's guts twice as much as they already did before.

Retro background designs by Ted Blackman.
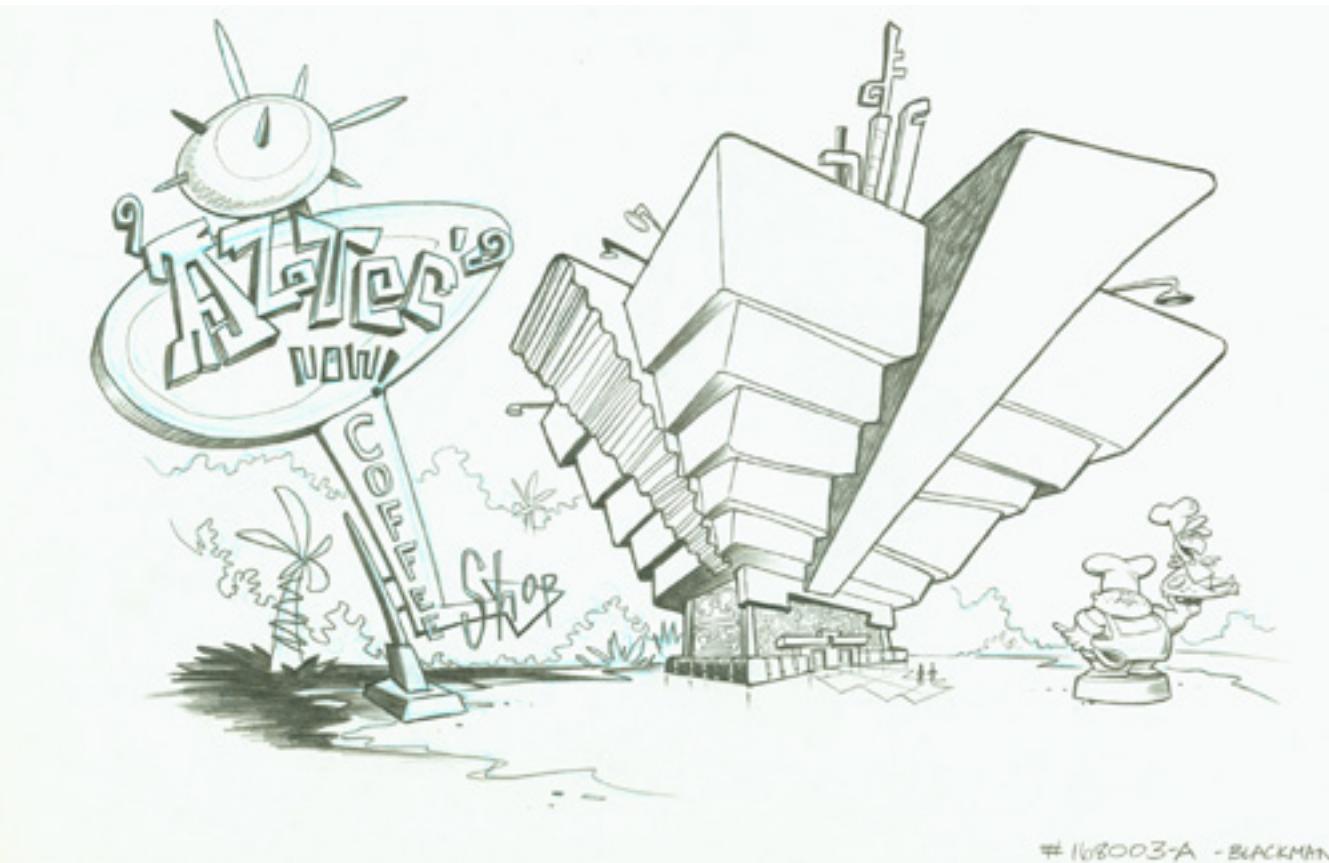
Paul Dini

Paul Dini was one of Chuck's scriptwriters, and to our surprise, he was completely sympathetic to the artists, to the Clampetts, and to the original show. He and I met, and someone got ABC to agree to let him take over for Chuck. Paul was very open to using ideas that I and my other artists came up with. He and I would go to lunch all the time and gag up new ideas for stories. He would then write the scripts, and not tell the network that any dirty artists had been involved in the story process.

Captain Huffenpuff Cries

I was in my office drawing Beany when I got a call from Michael Pole, the production manager on the show at DiC. He was in the recording booth with an emergency. "John, Jimmy MacGeorge refuses to say another line," he told me. "All the folks in the recording booth had a big fight and aren't speaking anymore! You gotta come down and do something!"

I don't know why he called me because I was not the voice director and had never been welcome at any of the recordings, but I went down. The booth was stuffed to the walls with angry people—the Clampetts, two network execs, the voice director, and the recording engineer, who was trying to do his job. Everyone had his or her arms crossed. There were a lot of purple faces.

Mike pointed through the window to Jimmy sitting on a lonely stool in front of the microphone. I went in to speak with him and find out what was the matter.

He had tears in his eyes. He looked up at me for help. I guess what had happened was everyone in the booth had fought over every line Jimmy had read, and made him do retake after retake until he couldn't figure out what anyone wanted anymore. I asked the engineer to record everything as I spoke to Jimmy.

I calmly explained the story to Jimmy and asked him to read a couple lines. They were perfect—and funny. I couldn't figure out what the problem was. Jimmy MacGeorge was a complete professional. Nobody knew the Captain better than he did, and he got every line right on the first take when I was there. So I went through the rest of the script with him and it went as smooth as butter. The only thing that slowed us down was when I tried to keep myself from laughing at his hilarious performance. As I left, Michael breathed a sigh of relief and winked at me.
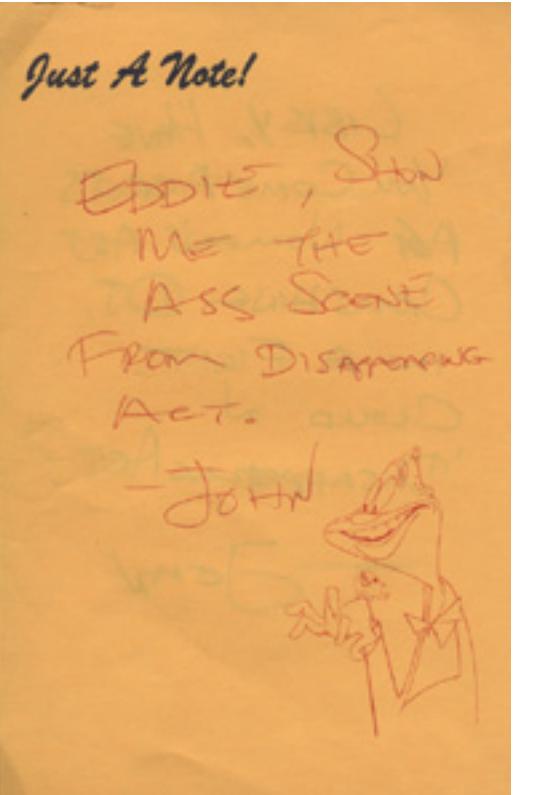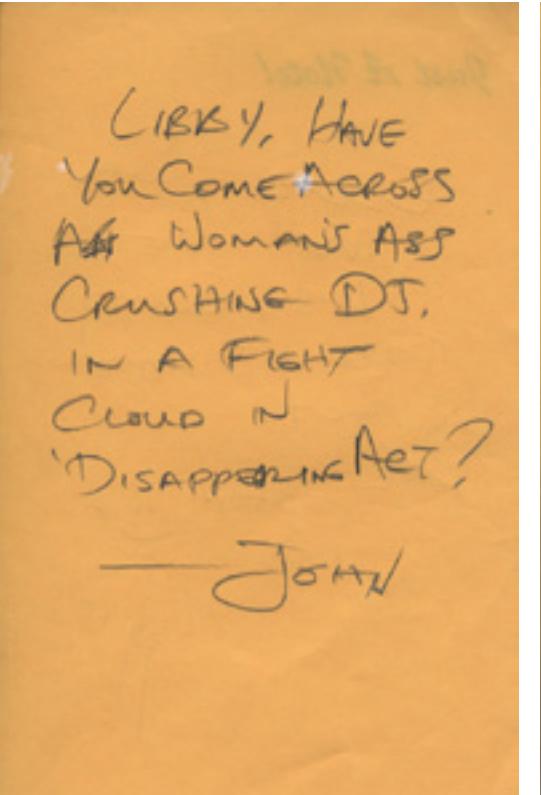
In Disney Tradition, I always made sure my cartoons had a good amount of ass jokes.

Some Good Episodes

Even with all the problems we had, we did manage to get a few really funny storyboards out. Jim Smith did "The Brotherhood of B.L.E.C.H." about Dishonest John (D.J.) and some of his evil gangster buddies. It opens with a scene I later used in the *Ren & Stimpy* episode "Sven Hoek." It's raining miserably outside, and we are looking at D.J.'s house. There is a huge picture window, and down in the left corner of the window, we see a bored looking D.J. staring out at the rain. Bruce Timm did a lively storyboard for "Cecil Meets Cecilia." Eddie's boards were especially crazy and really baffled the network thugs.

We all loved D.J. and redesigned him a little to make him more . . . I dunno . . . more something. He was really fun to draw. I kept wanting to do stories that starred him and that told the action from the villain's point of view. I wanted the audience to empathize with him.

We did one story called "D.J. Goes Ape," where he gets kidnapped by Ping Pong the giant ape, who takes him to his lair on a remote island and marries him. D.J. gets pregnant, and the doting father-to-be keeps feeding D.J. bananas and listening to the gurgles and groans coming from his belly. It was funny and really heartwarming. When the execs saw this episode, we experienced another one of those sputtering, finger-pointing incidents.

Visually, the shows continued to steadily improve, in spite of all the obstacles and infighting. They had their funny moments, but the relation between the Clampetts and the execs was getting worse every day. It was astonishing to see how badly they treated the family of the guy who created this much-loved show that we were all killing ourselves to revive. The execs were waiting for an excuse to kill the show and they finally found one.

Naked Beany

In one of the episodes there was a tornado that was tearing everything up in sight. It grabbed "The Leakin' Lena" (Beany and Cecil's boat) and spun it around at lightning speed, breaking it up. I had drawn some gags into the spinning tornado, like crazy debris that would only be on screen for a few frames so you would laugh when you saw crazy stuff spinning around the whirlwind. I drew Beany for one pose spinning around the tornado naked, with his pants and Beany-cap also spinning in another area of the tornado. It was a pose you've seen in a million old cartoons—including the original *Beany and Cecil.* Beany has his knees together; he is hunched forward with his arms clasped together between his legs hiding his shame. He looks embarrassed.

We were running the rough cut of the cartoon for everyone on the Moviola, when Jennie all of a sudden yelled, "WAIT! Run that back again. I think I saw something there that wasn't on the storyboard." We ran it back. She told us to slow it down. Beany's pose was held for only four frames, or one-sixth of a second. She smiled, straightened up, and looked up at Jeff, who winked a hairless eye at her, and they walked out.

The gag wasn't dirty in the least. Beany's peepee wasn't poking at the camera or anything. But it wasn't in the script, so they had us on a technicality.

The next day, the show was over, and even though there was much sadness, there was also great relief. I especially felt bad for the Clampetts. All the cartoonists had already experienced abuse at the hands of writers and execs for years, but the Clampetts had no inkling of this kind of torture until it happened to them.

Every now and then I dig out my old tapes and watch them with friends, and they actually have some pretty funny stuff in them, despite their crude late-Eighties execution.

Title painting by Bruce Timm.

Bruce Timm's naked Crag.

The Ripping Friends

Saturday Morning Death

In the 1970s, the market for new TV cartoons was basically Saturday morning network television. Because of the control that TV executives had over the content and because of hippie action groups who believed that classic funny cartoons were too violent for kids, there were all kinds of rules and formulas that ruined the whole idea of cartoons.

Cartoons were no longer intended to be entertaining; they had to be a good influence on kids. As a result, studios had to dumb down their ideas to get them sold. It had become so bad by the 1980s that executives would only buy cartoons that were based on some already established property. That's when we had cartoons based on greeting card characters, classic cartoons (but without everything that made the old cartoons popular), and toys.

He-Man and G.I. Joe were cartoons that were essentially funded by the toy companies and produced by cheap cartoon studios. Although the half-hour shows were technically not commercials, but their purpose was the same, to advertise the toys.

Ripping Friends pitch board.

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No Violence in Violent Shows

The irony was that the toys featured in these new 1980s cartoons were all about violence, which was banned on Saturday morning cartoons—when the cartoons were created for the emerging market of syndication, the crazy restrictions were applied to syndicated shows as well. G.I. Joe was a soldier who couldn't shoot anybody. The hack cartoon writers had to write around the fact that nobody could ever hurt anybody in these shows, and they were only too happy to do it. In this environment there was no way to sell an original cartoon property, let alone a funny one.

By the mid-1980s the new market for syndicated cartoons was beginning to become a real threat to Saturday morning cartoons. Instead of the usual network season of thirteen half-hours, a studio could now sell sixty-five half-hours at a time. These cartoons would play every weekday in the afternoons when kids got home from school in addition to the Saturday time slots.

I had already taken all my original cartoon ideas to the Saturday morning studios, and, of course, got rejected every time for the simple reason that the executives had not already seen my characters on greeting cards or toy packages.

Slab delivers a right hook to his replica stuffed with coleslaw, circa 1990s.
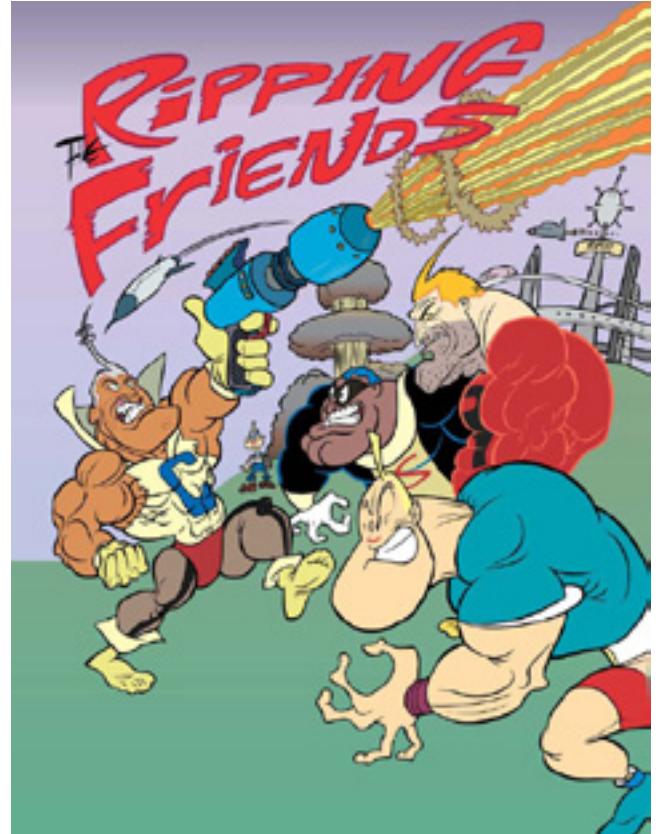
I Try Selling to Syndication

After the semi-success of Bakshi's *Mighty Mouse* series and the Beany fiasco, I thought I might have a better chance of selling my own shows straight to syndication. I found a syndication company in Hollywood and set up an appointment. I took *Ren & Stimpy*, *Wally Whimsy*, and a couple other show presentations to the syndicator and pitched them.

The reaction here was much better than at my network pitches. The executive was a regular guy, not some liberal-soccer-mom, and he laughed at everything until tears came from his eyes.

At last I was in! Or so I thought ... After the guy stopped laughing, he said, "Listen, these are all hilarious, but it isn't what is selling in syndication right now." I asked what was. He candidly told me, "Look, we make cartoons to sell toys to boys. Boys want violence. They want big muscular characters who shoot, punch, and rip everything up—and they have to use all kinds of recognizable vehicles, like tanks, rockets, and planes, so we can sell all of them as toys and playsets. If you bring me something like that, I can get a toy company involved, and we might be able to get something of yours on TV."

The Ripping Friends' crack scientist Dr. Gene Poole.

My Crew and I Scribble Characters

After the pitch I had lunch with Lynne Naylor, Bruce Timm, and Jim Gomez. I told them how the meeting went and everyone was depressed. Then an inspiration hit me: "Say, waitaminnute. Let's do it! Let's give them the biggest, most muscular, most violent characters ever! Guys who 'shoot, punch and rip everything up! . . . We'll call them ... the ripping friends!" I started making up the whole show concept on the spot, while Lynne furiously scribbled notes so we'd remember everything later.
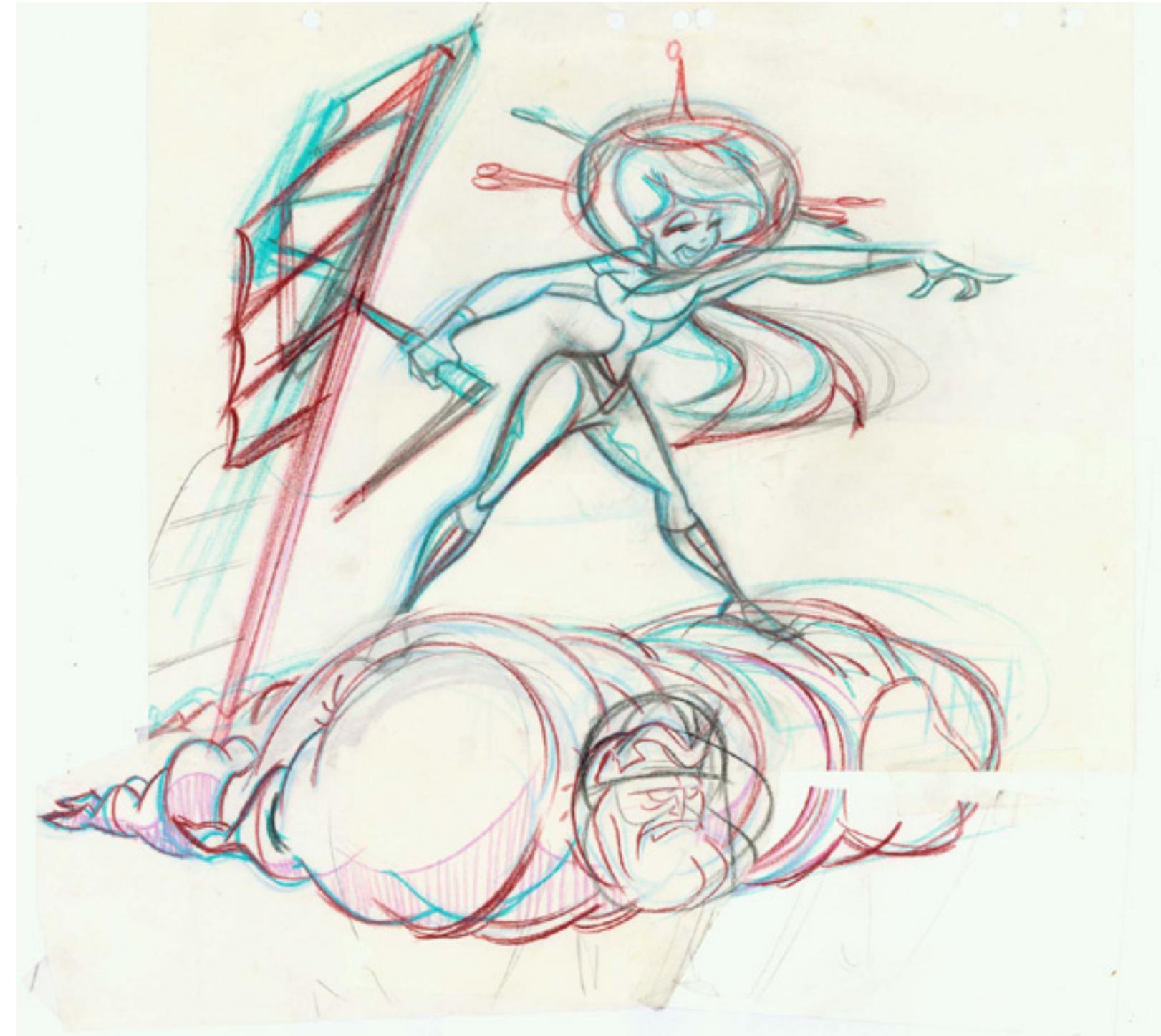
There would be four guys who were the world's most manly men—so manly that they didn't even use superpowers to win their battles. They thought super heroes are wimps because they have to cheat to win their battles. The Ripping Friends would only use sheer will power, manliness, and their intense love of pain to crush their foes. They figured if their fights didn't hurt, they didn't earn their victories. It would be too easy. They would scream all through their fights to celebrate how much it hurt.

In fact, they would scream every day just to practice. Every little daily misfortune would cause them utter discomfort. Even breakfast. Each morning they would sit down for breakfast with their favorite cereal: "Rice Rippies." Crag, the leader, would pour the cereal into the bowl and slowly add milk as all the other Ripping Friends would lean forward to listen to the special sound the cereal made. What sound did it make? It *screamed*! Which would drive the Ripping Friends into their own screaming frenzy, and they would kick the table over and start smashing everything in sight while bellowing their pent-up rage to the heavens. All this screaming gave them the energy they needed to get through another day of vigorous crime fighting.

A mock-up for our shot at a product tie-in: Rice Rippies!

Vehicles

I started sketching *The Ripping Friends out* and made them so muscular and huge that they barely fit into their manly futuristic vehicles. They rode and flew skin-tight vehicles. I added another twist. Most heroic characters live in some specific environment. For example, Tarzan lives in the jungle, G.I. Joe is in the army, and He-Man in medieval space. I thought this was too limiting for *The Ripping Friends*;
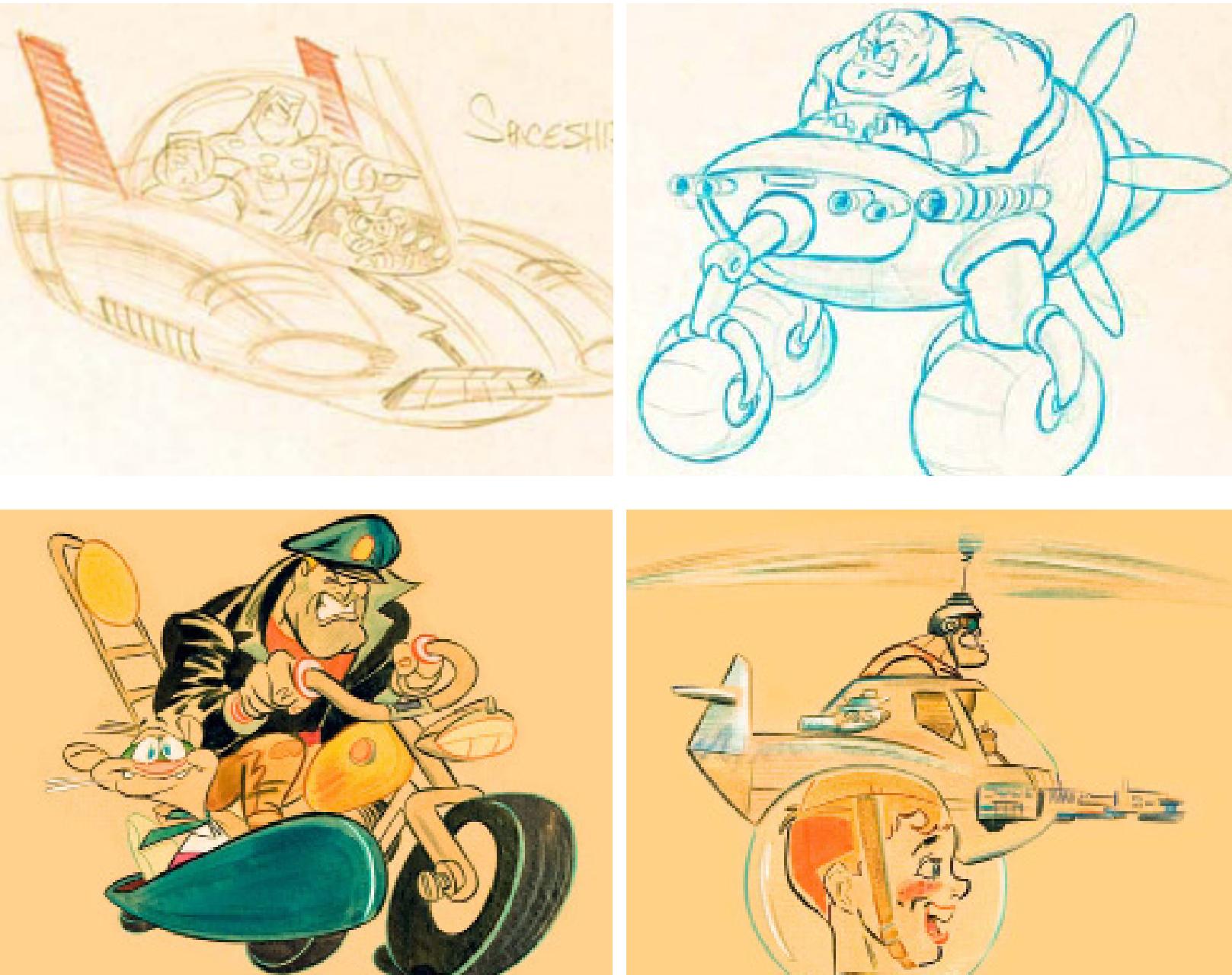
I wanted them to be able to wear every heroic costume possible, and drive every imaginable kind of vehicle, and shoot every kind of murderous, flesh ripping weapon. So I thought, "Let's have them be able to go through time." That way they could exist in any environment we wanted, and we could sell more playsets, costumes, and vehicles.

Crag survey an unreasonably
hirsute villain circa mid-1990s.
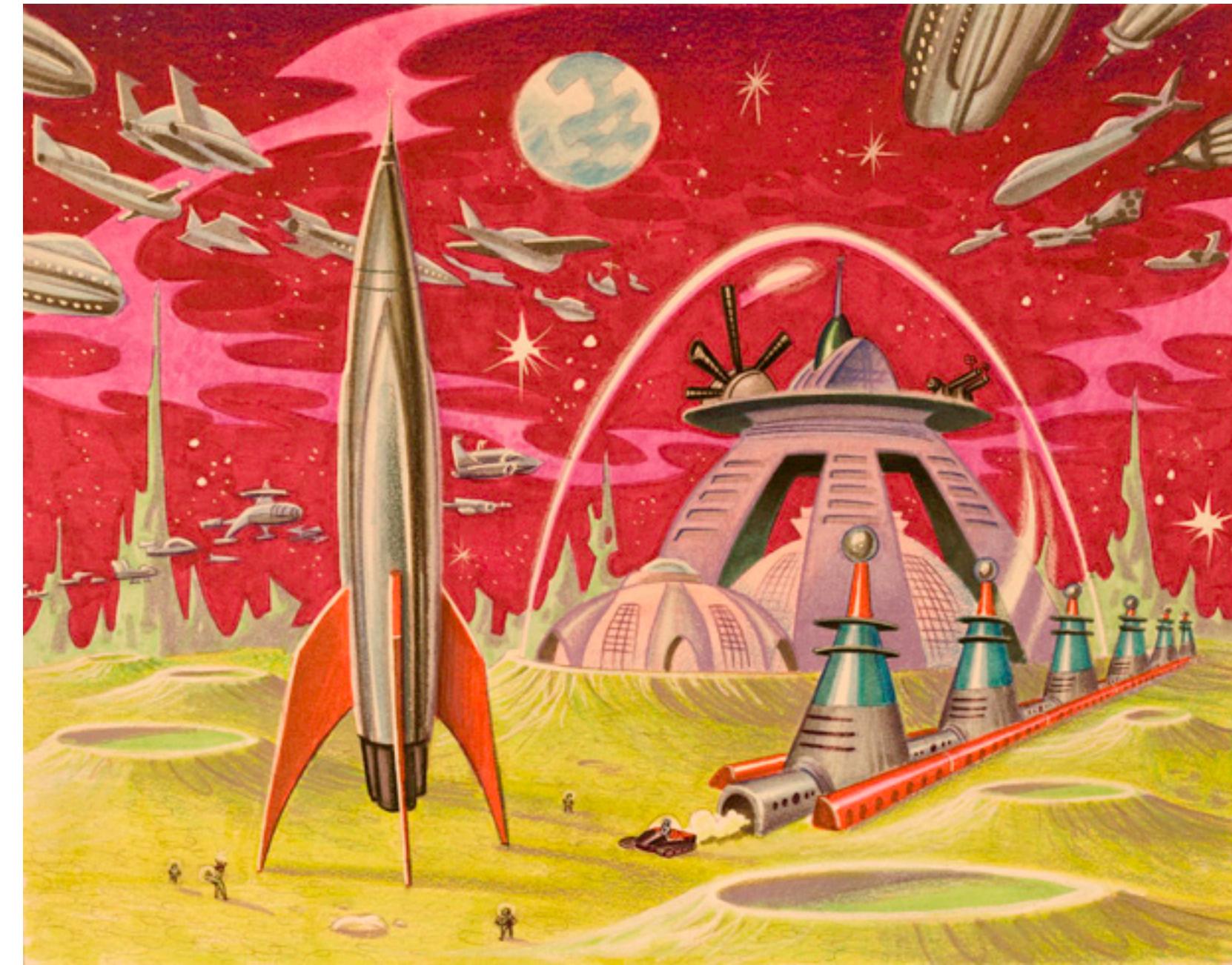
The bunch of us then went
and drew up a presentation
of *The Ripping Friends*, with
drawings of the main characters
in their regular costumes, and
then drawings of them in their
manly vehicles. Bruce Timm did
a great drawing of their secret
headquarters on the moon—
Moon City University, circa
early 1990s.

To explain the time-travel concept I drew a picture of Rip in his BVDs with one hand in position to hold a weapon, and then we designed a bunch of different costumes and weapons that we could lay on top of this drawing to show how he would look in different environments and time periods. Bruce Timm did most of these renderings, circa early 1990s.

He-Mom

I came up with a character who was the only thing in the world the Ripping Friends were afraid of—He-Mom, the world's most manly Mom. She was a domineering force who believed in rules.

Nuclear bombs could be going off outside the window, and the Ripping Friends would run to the door in the middle of dinner to go out and save the world, but He-Mom would stop them. "Oh no you don't! You aren't saving anybody until you finish everything that's on your plate." Meanwhile we'd see people melting from radioactive fallout and clawing on the windows begging the Ripping Friends to come out and save them, which they would after they had finished supper.

He-Mom had a collection of special frying pans that she would use to spank her kids when they were out of line. Each act of disobedience was weighed for its severity, and she would pick out the proper size pan to fit the punishment.

I custom tailored the entire concept to what the syndicator told me kids and toy companies wanted, and I still couldn't sell it in syndication. I finally did sell it years later, ironically to Saturday morning TV networks whose rules against everything boys like wouldn't allow me to make what the show was about. But that's another story.

Crag dreading the impending beating from He-Mom's frying pan, circa early 1990s.

A collector's item cel I did with Jim Smith, circa mid-1990s.
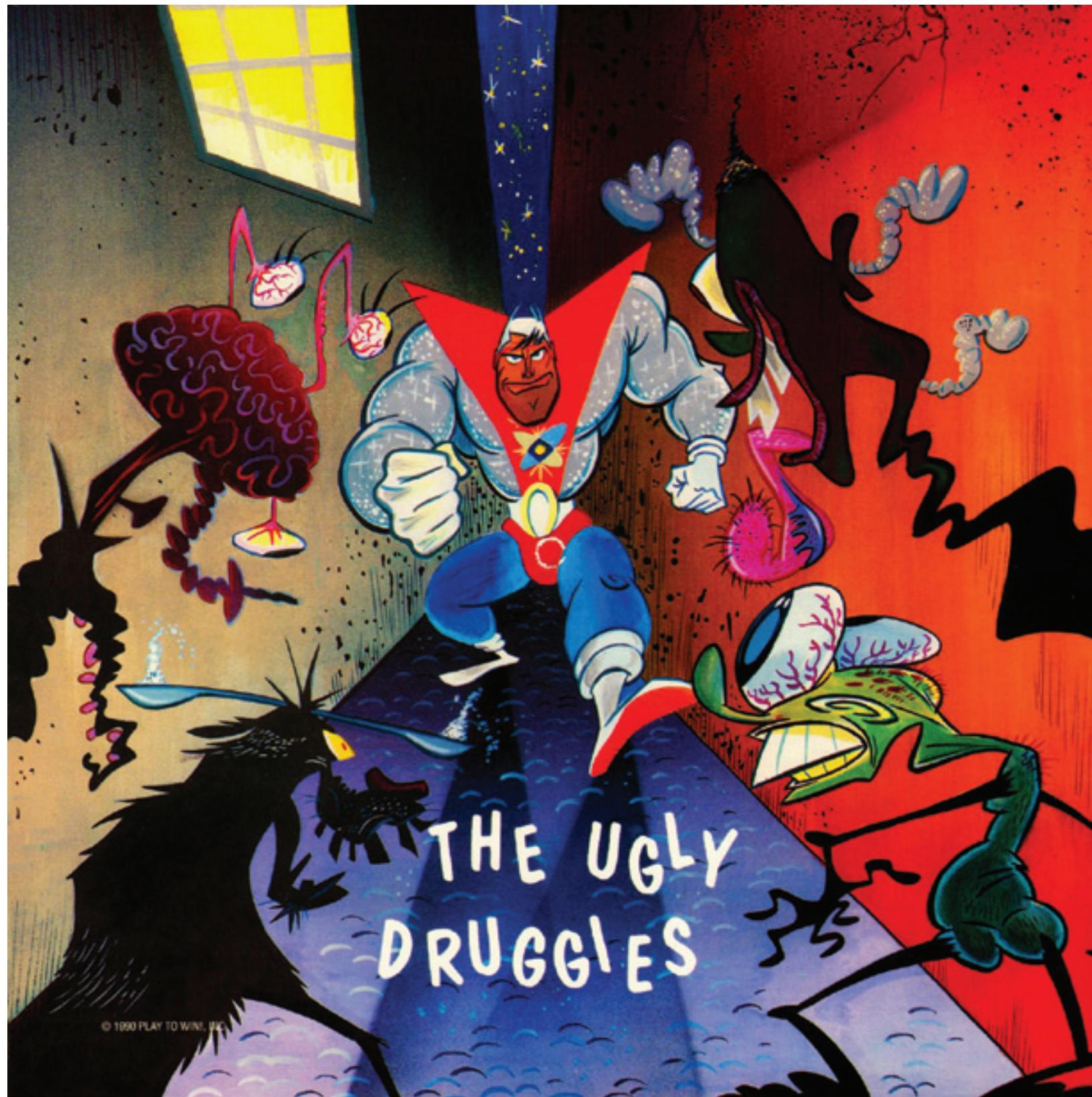
My packaging illustration for "Captain Quantum and the Ugly Druggies", 1990.

Starting Spümcø and Selling Ren and Stimpy

Quitting Animation Starting Spümcø

Frustrated by our experiences trying to launch animated projects, in 1988 a few friends and I decided to give up animation and start an illustration studio. We rented a small office on Melrose near the Paramount studio, and landed a job designing a board game that was supposed to teach kids that drugs were bad for them. It was called "Captain Quantum and The Ugly Druggies." We needed a name for the new studio. I had a character named "Raymond Spum"—a villain in my He-Hog the Atomic Pig idea— and from that we came up with "Spümcø."

Wheel of Destruction art by Lynn Naylor and I.

Box cover and board game art
by Lynn Naylor, Bob Camp and I.

The other partners in Spümcø—Lynne Naylor, Jim
Smith, Bob Camp—and I drew all the artwork for the
board game, which was eventually released in 1990.. In
the meantime, Carl Macek, a film distributor who worked
in the same building, told us he had heard that the cable
network Nickelodeon was going to start a Saturday
morning block of cartoons and they were looking for
new ideas. They weren't interested in ordering cartoons
from the established studios because 1: they thought
the product was tired and worn, and 2: they wouldn't be
able to own the rights to the shows. Instead they had the
novel idea of finding young and hungry cartoonists who
had fresh characters and ideas they were dying to make.
Well, that sure described me.

Spinner illustration by Bob Camp.

Meet Vanessa, Pitch Everything

Carl set up an appointment for me to meet with Vanessa Coffey from Nickelodeon to pitch her some ideas. Vanessa was in charge of the new animation department. She flew out from New York and stayed at the Sheraton Universal Hotel, where she was taking pitches. When I went up to meet her, the room was like an oven because the air conditioning was broken. After a polite greeting, I launched into pitching all my concepts: Jimmy's Clubhouse, He-Hog the Atomic Pig, Cartoon Cavalcade, Predator, G.I. Babies, and more.

I did my usual thing of jumping around the room and hurling myself to the floor as Vanessa sat hunched in a ball on the couch, staring at me with wide eyes, never blinking once. I was slapping her across the face with sheets of sweat launched from my hair, and still she didn't budge.

After the pitch, I stood there exhausted, breathing heavily and pouring sweat from every gland. "Well, what do you think?" I asked. Vanessa said, "That was the most exciting pitch I've ever seen. You must really believe in these characters!"
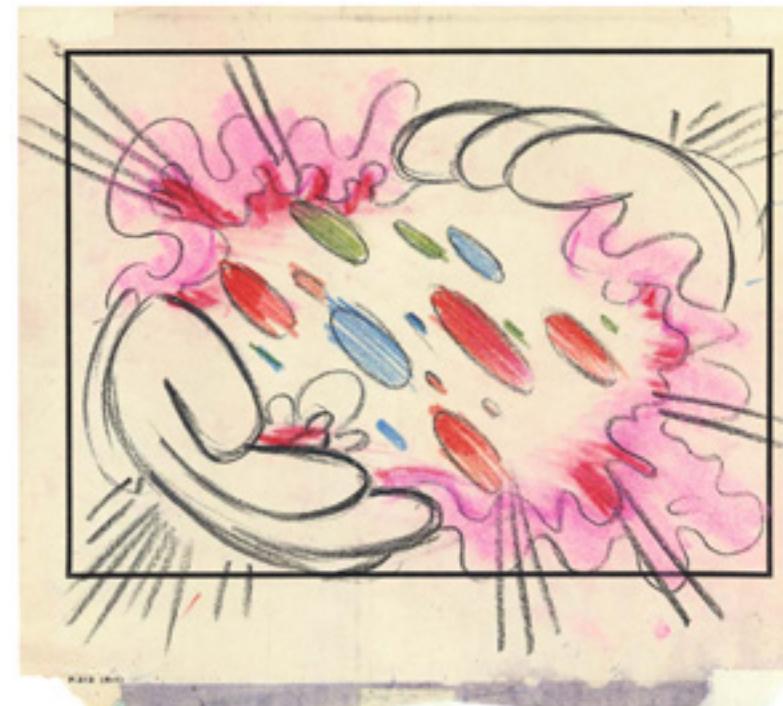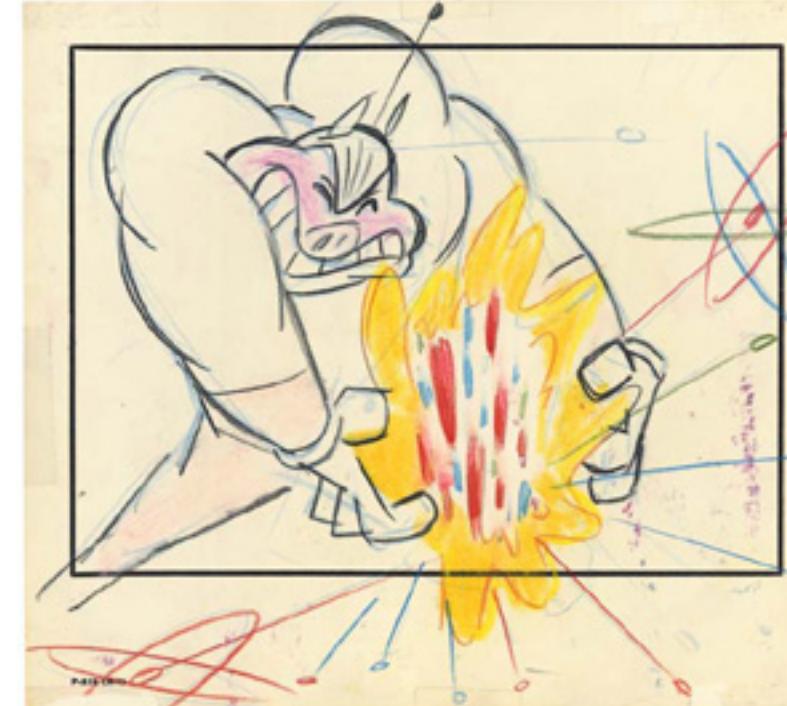
My He-Hog storyboards, circa early 1990s.

Predator presentation art
by Jim Smith, early 1990s.

G.I. Babies presentation art
by Jim Smith, circa early 1990s.

I Fly to Nickelodeon

Vanessa said that she was supposed to go back to New York and pitch all the ideas she heard to the rest of the key execs at Nickelodeon, but she didn't think she would be able to get across my shows without all the sweat. She checked to see if they would fly me out there to do the pitch again and within the week, I was in New York at the Nickelodeon offices.

I sat in a boardroom on one side of the table with Vanessa while a group of Nickelodeon executives, including the head of development and production Geoffrey Darby, Herb Scannell and others sat across from us.

I went into pitching something like five shows in a row, and the executives kept sinking lower and lower into their seats, until by the end of it all I saw were little eyes peeking up from the edge of the table. They looked terrified and lost.

Just then, in walked Gerry Laybourne, the president of Nickelodeon. "What is all this noise going on in here?" she asked. All the execs looked up at her with the hope that she would save them from the awful predicament of having to make a decision.

Vanessa introduced me to "The Boss Lady," and I pitched the last show I had brought along, *Jimmy's Clubhouse*. I had a story called "Wilderness Adventure" about Jimmy the Idiot Boy's dad waking him up in the morning with the promise that he was going to take Jimmy to "The Happiest Place On Earth." Jimmy, of course, imagines Disneyland, but it turns out that his dad's idea of the happiest place on earth is the wilderness, "God's Country," where he and Jimmy will go hunting. When Jimmy finds out the purpose of guns, he freaks out and does everything he can to scare the beasts away before they get trapped or shot. Eventually they manage to kill some fine specimens of nature, and Jimmy's dad teaches him how to clean them and tan their hides with their brains.

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In the middle of the pitch, my asthma inhaler flew out of my shirt pocket and smacked Ms. Laybourne in the right breast. Everyone gasped, but she gamely picked up the inhaler, gave it back to me, and I finished the pitch covered in sweat.

The execs all looked up at her for guidance, not able to decide if any of the shows were Nickelodeon material. Gerry then turned to them and said, "Buy something from this man!" She turned and walked out of the room, and everyone burst into applause and backslapping.

Vanessa Wants Two Shows

I flew back to Los Angeles and got a call from Vanessa the next day. She said they were so thrilled with the pitches that they wanted to buy two shows: Jimmy's Clubhouse and Cartoon Cavalcade. But, she said that her favorite characters in Cavalcade were Ren and Stimpy, and wanted to know if I could focus the show around them rather than around the kid characters. She didn't like the fake characters that I had stuck into the show to impress the Saturday morning executives.

The contracts arrived, and when I read them, I quickly realized the shocking deal I had to make in order to get my characters on the air. I had to give my characters and the copyrights to Nickelodeon. I had never imagined that. It would have been unheard of in network TV at the time. Regulations used to protect creators and producers from having to sell their shows outright and thus losing the opportunity to profit from them should they be lucky enough to produce a hit.

BUD RAYMOND- Donny Chickenchild's best friend

BABBS- Donny's kid sister
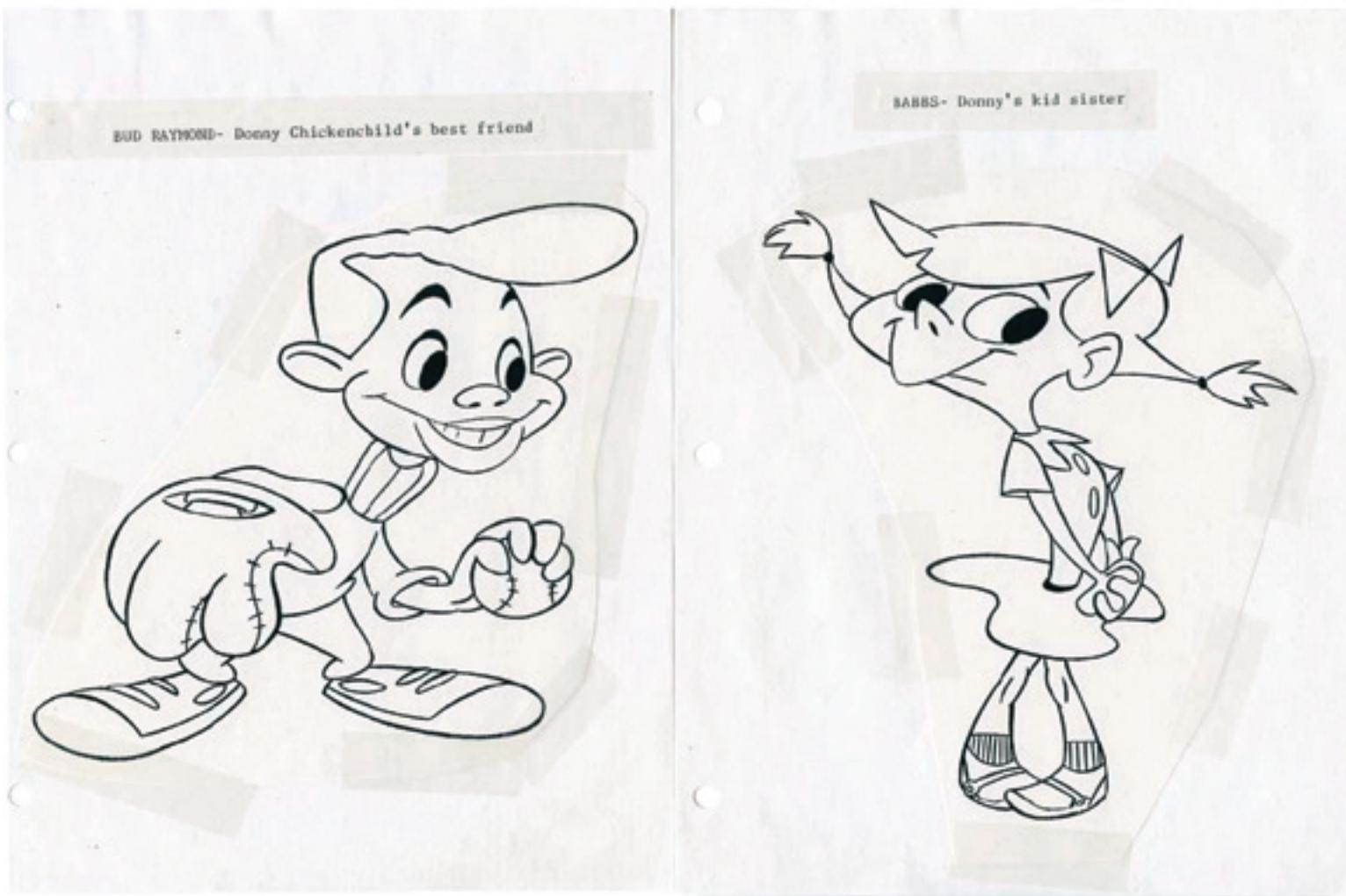
Bud (the token black kid who's smarter than everyone else) and Donny's sister were added after *Ren & Stimpy* got rejected by Saturday morning cartoon networks. I thought more generic characters would help soften the concept and make it more saleable.

Cable networks didn't have such restrictions though because regulators felt they were at such a disadvantage from big broadcast networks. In order to even up the playing field, cable networks were allowed to buy the rights to other people's creations wholesale.

After Ren and Stimpy became a hit, cable became more competitive, and instead of making them adhere to the same creators' rights regulations that the networks had, they instead lifted the regulations from the broadcast networks. From then on, no creator had any legal protection and the networks began to start their own studios so they would not have to deal with pesky third-party studios that wanted to own their properties. Once I realized the situation, I decided to sell Nickelodeon only one show and picked *Ren & Stimpy*.

I thought we had sold the series, but Vanessa Coffey instead asked me to do a six-minute pilot that Nickelodeon could "focus test" along with a pile of other pilots from different creators. A "focus test" is an artificial environment created by marketing "experts" where expressionless hosts pitch ideas and products to a random audience, and then ask them leading questions about the product to see if the product is something that should be put into full production. In the case of TV networks, before a show is picked up, it is usually "focus-tested" in front of an audience. Kiddie cartoons are pitched to kids and their moms. The moms usually scare their kids into giving dishonest answers to questions like, "Do you think this cartoon is too violent?"

Vanessa wanted Ren and Stimpy, shown here on barf bags from a plane ride out East in 1989.
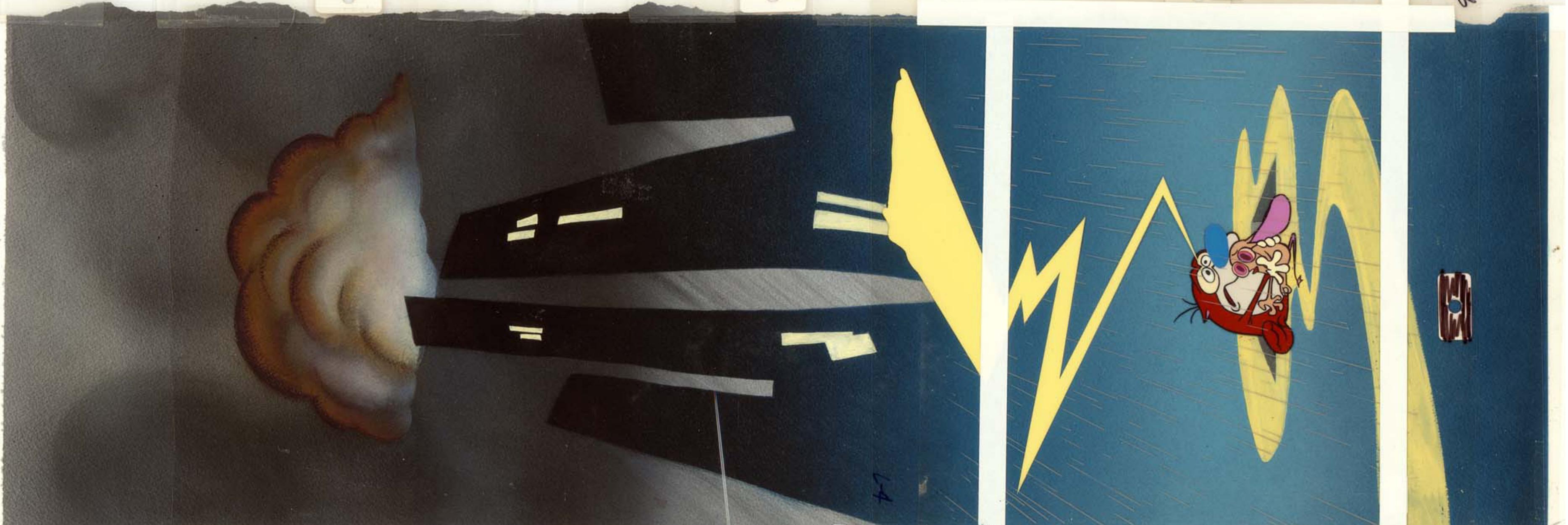
Pan set-up for "Big House Blues",
1990.

Big House Blues Storyboard

Bob Camp, Lynne Naylor, Jim Smith, and I did a storyboard in 1990 that got approved lickety-split. Unfortunately, after I timed it, it was way too long. We cut some stuff and it was still two minutes too long, so I asked Vanessa if that would be ok, and she said it was.

Jim Smith rough layout
inspired by storyboard sketch
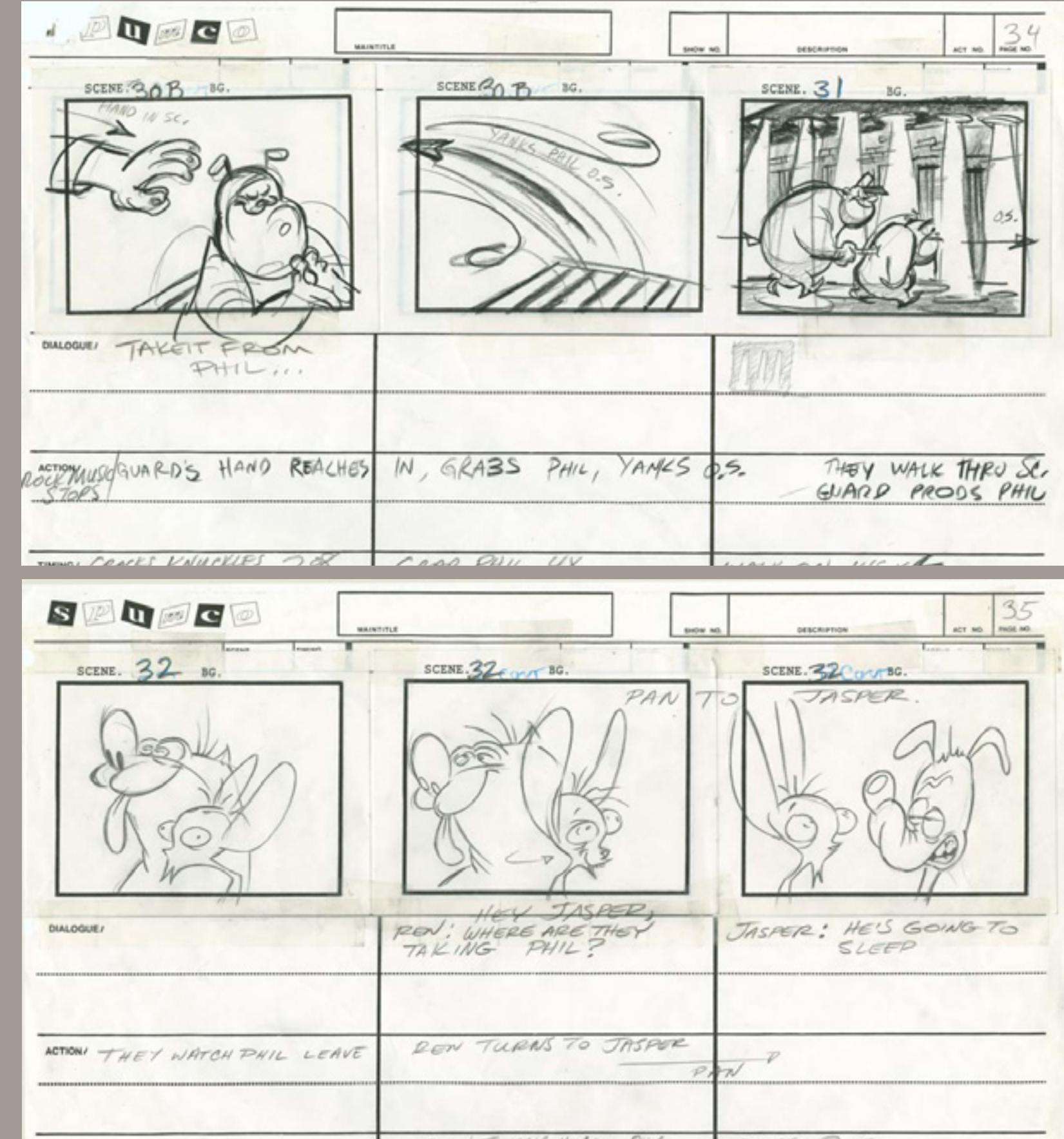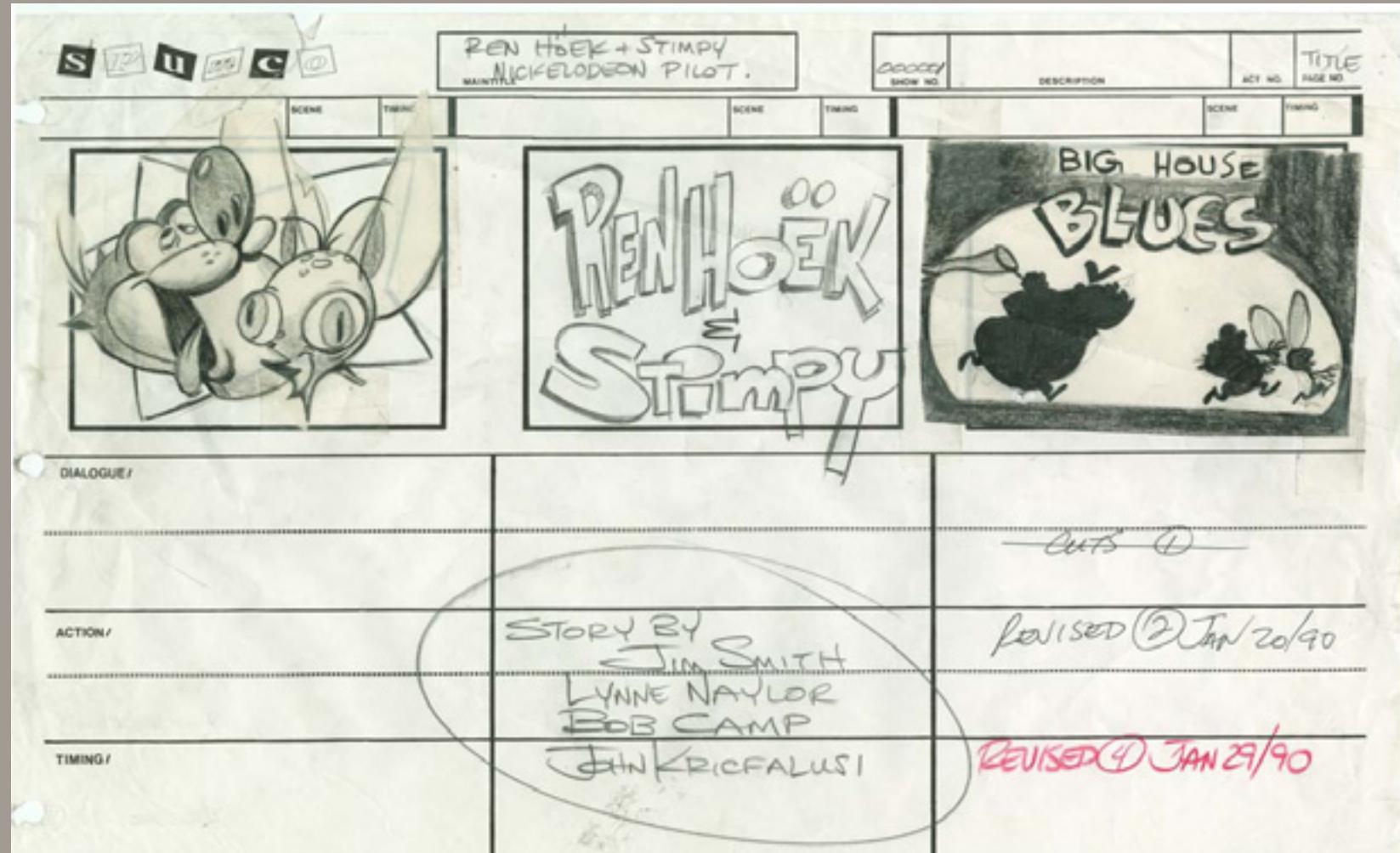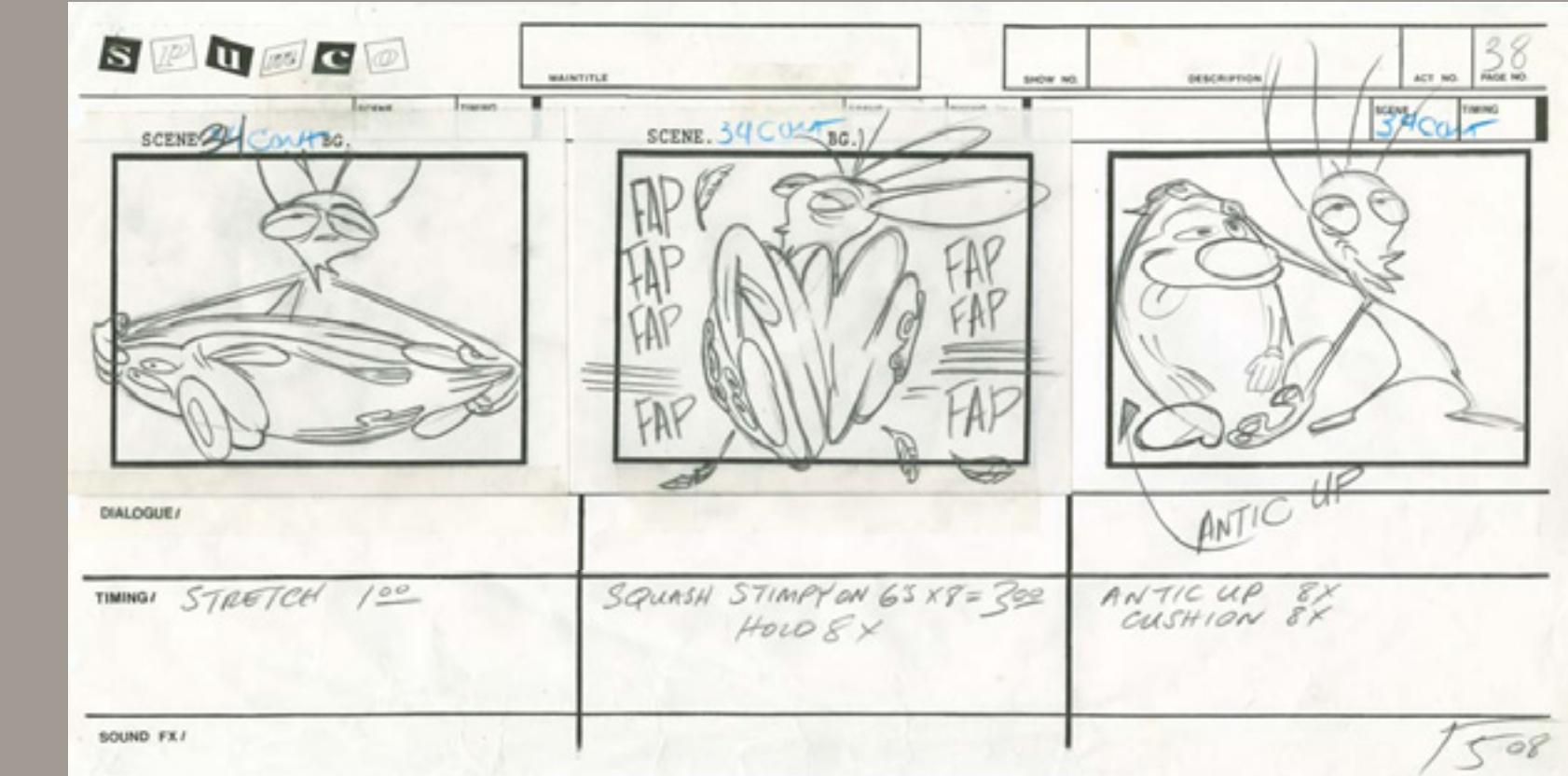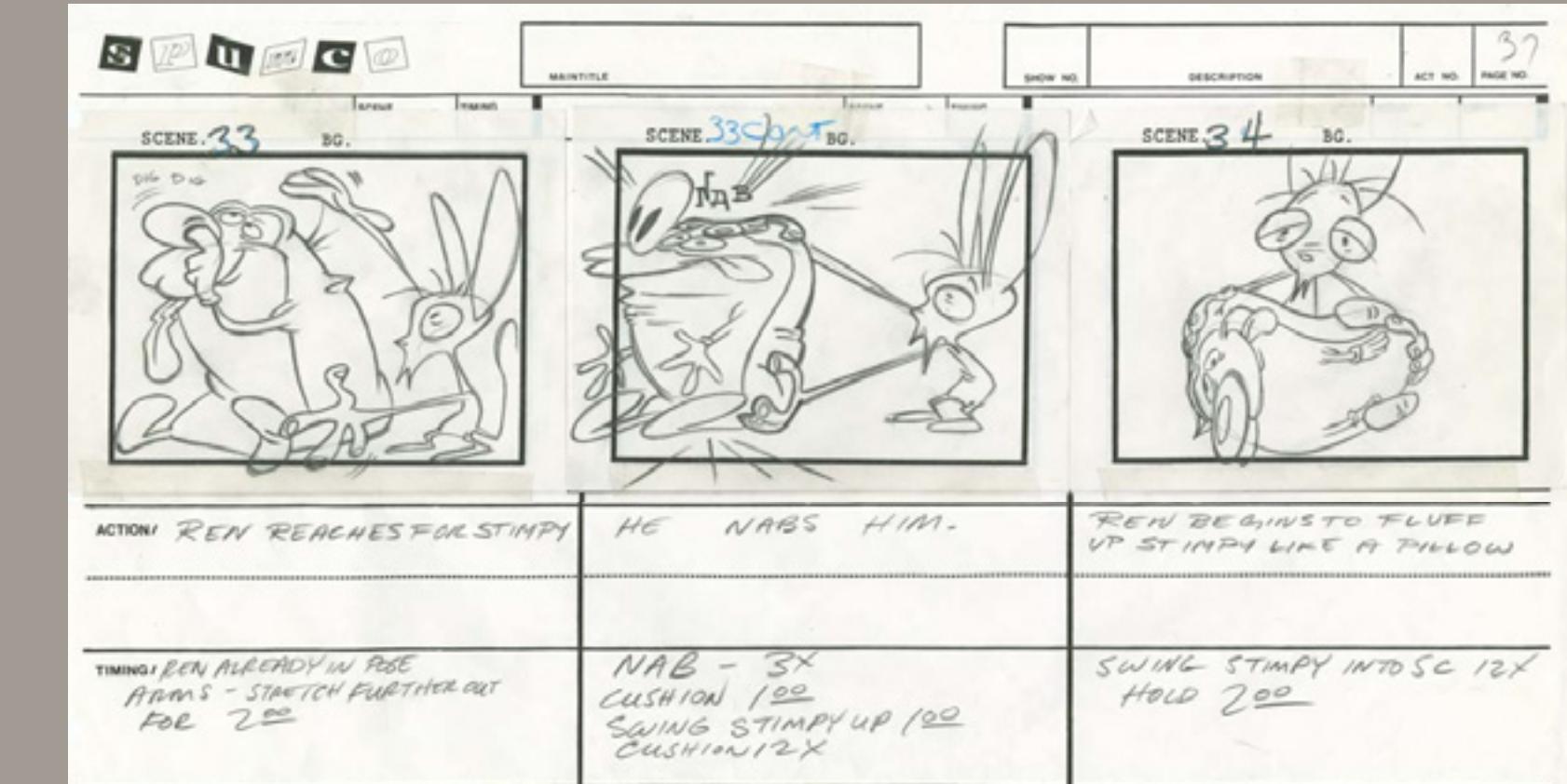
The story was about Ren and Stimpy being homeless pets that are caught by a dogcatcher and sent to animal prison where they await "The Big Sleep." The same crew that did the storyboard also did the layouts, which can be an ideal situation, and in this case it was. We all had very different and strong personal styles that complemented each other's work. I cast the scenes according to each artist's strengths. Jim did the solidly drawn manly scenes, Lynne did the funny, cute scenes (a lot of Stimpy), I did the wild scenes, and Bob did all around stuff including character layouts and background paintings. He painted the first gross close-ups (like Stimpy with the morning eye crust) that became a staple of the show later.
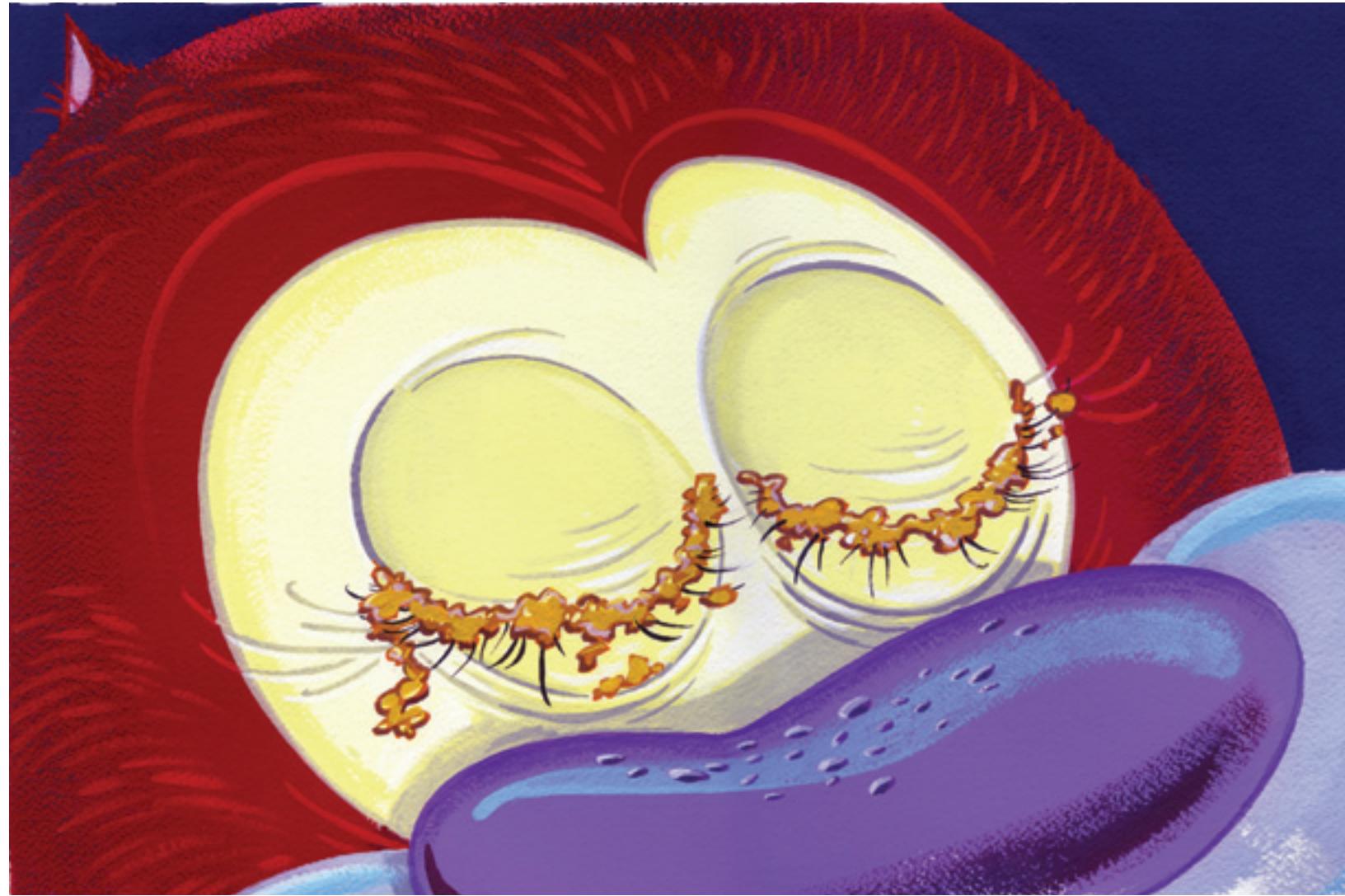
The first gross close-up painting by Bob Camp, 1991.
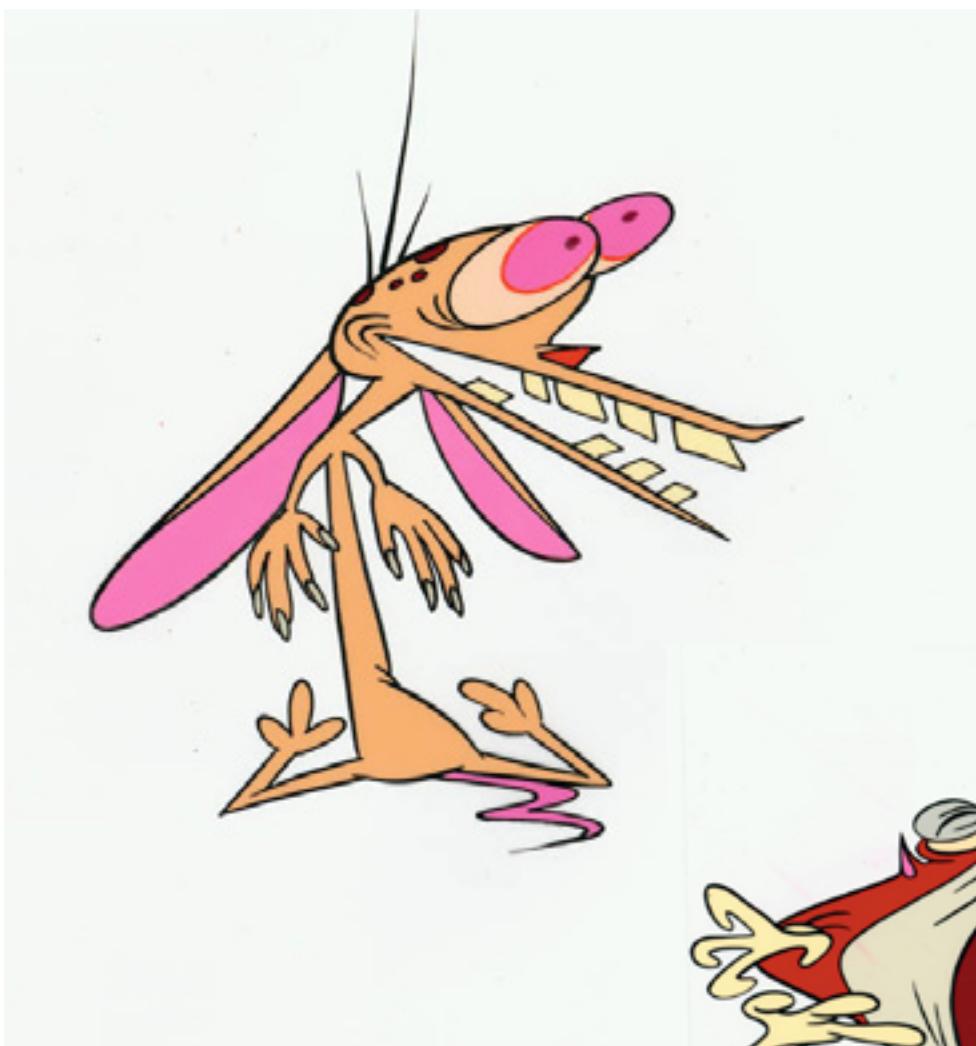
We reveled in animating off-model characters in response to years of having to trace model sheets at Saturday morning cartoon studios.

Sound Effects and Hairballs

I met an old sound effects editor, John Bushelman, who had a ton of sound effects from classic movies and shorts, and it turned out that he was an editor on *The Three Stooges*! I was in heaven. He had shelves of rolled-up mag tracks of some of the strangest noises you've ever heard – Stimpy's hairball gurgles came from his collection. I had originally made a deal with the composer of Bakshi's *Mighty Mouse* music scores and sent him the rough cut of the cartoon as the deadline was looming. John had been really gung ho to do the job . . . until he saw the film. With a few days left before delivery was due, John called to tell me his conscience wouldn't allow him to work on such a distasteful project.

Henry Porch, our production assistant, was driving down Sunset Boulevard when he saw a sign that said "APM Stock Music Library." He went in and discovered this great old library of radio, TV, and movie music from the 1930s through the 1970s. He went through a lot of the music and helped me select cuts that would set up the moods for the cartoon and we were saved. Henry did such a good job that he became our music researcher and a key creative figure in the series.

We needed assistants to do cleanup drawings of the animation layouts and other odd jobs. The word got out to CalArts and a bunch of young eager cartoonists showed up begging to work for free, just for the fun and experience. We hired Jordan Reichek, Joe Orrantia, and Carey Yost, among others. We planned for the crew of experienced cartoonists and CalArts kids to do all the animation and assisting, but I quickly realized there was no way we could do it all ourselves, so I called Bob Jaques and Kelly Armstrong in Canada and asked them to help out. Bob and Kelly were the perfect balance to the animation we were doing in Los Angeles. Their animation was very controlled and clever as well as specific to the voice tracks and story, while ours was more wild. I had worked with Bob on *Mighty Mouse* and our styles were almost telepathically synched.
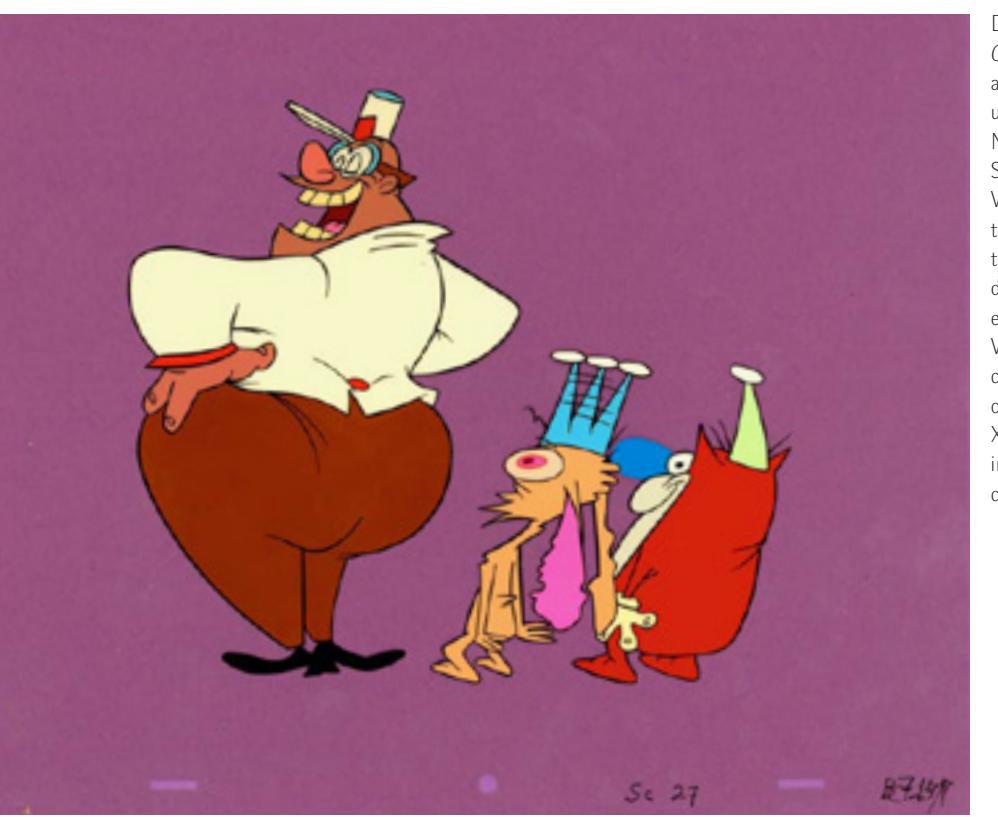
David Feiss (who later created *Cow and Chicken*) came on board and animated a few scenes for us and they were great. Lynne Naylor's animation was inspired. So was Kelly Armstong's. We experimented with new techniques for every aspect of the pilot including inbetweening, dialogue lip synch, cutting, sound editing, and background painting. When the animation was complete, we had the dilemma of how to ink the cels. I hated Xeroxing, and loved the brush inking of the old Hanna-Barbera cartoons.

This scene, animated by Dave Feiss, was deemed "too gay" by the Nickleodeon execs so was cut from "Big House Blues".

A Bob Jaques cel from 1991.

I got in touch with Bardel Studios in Vancouver and they agreed to brush-ink it and came up with a new technique to do it. They used cheap fat brushes and cut some of the brush hairs off. They did a wonderful job of thick and thin inking, and it really made everything we did stand out.

Bob Camp did most of the background paintings. I tried a few myself and they were very sloppy. After awhile, I gave up on painting backgrounds of representational objects, and decided to make color cards, inspired by Bob Clampett's short "Baby Bottleneck". As I was doing this, I experimented with painting abstract shapes and blobs onto the backgrounds. This became a signature of the series and it was invented purely because I was so terrible at painting.

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"Big House Blues" original layout
drawings along with the final
hand painted versions, 1990.
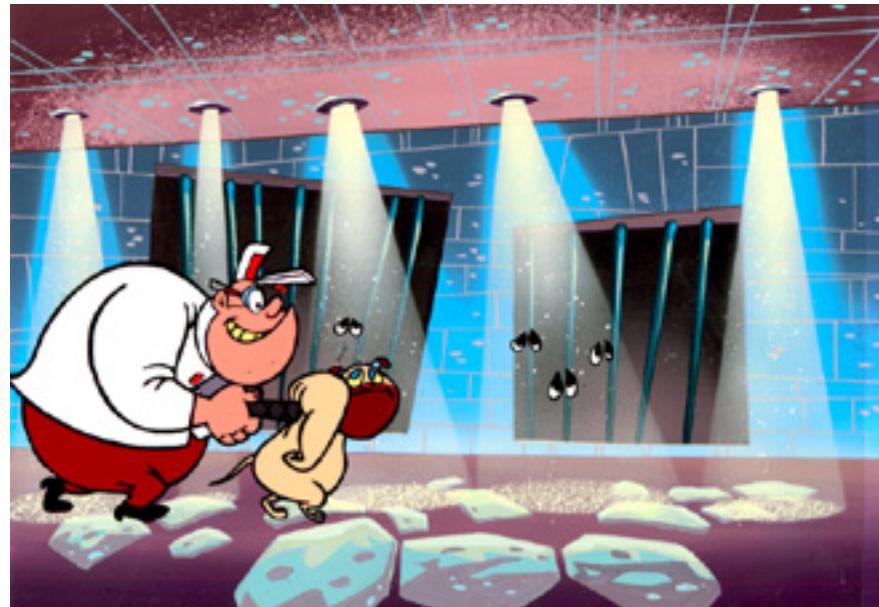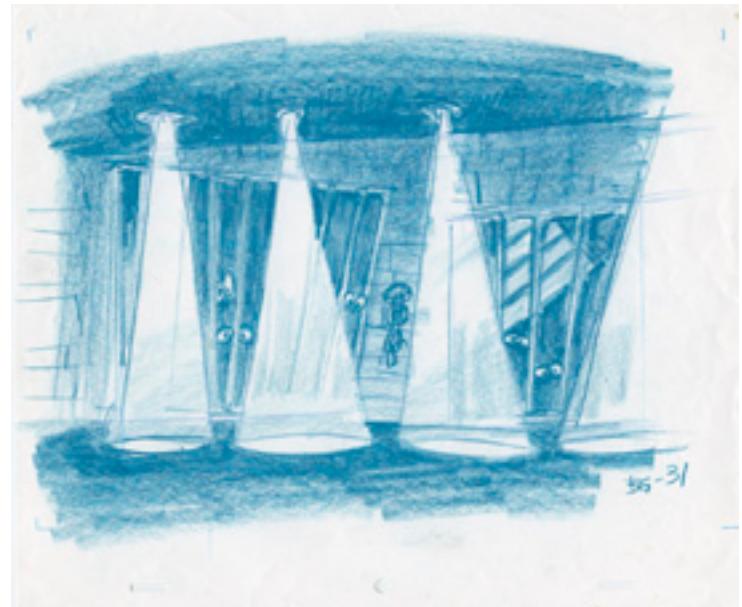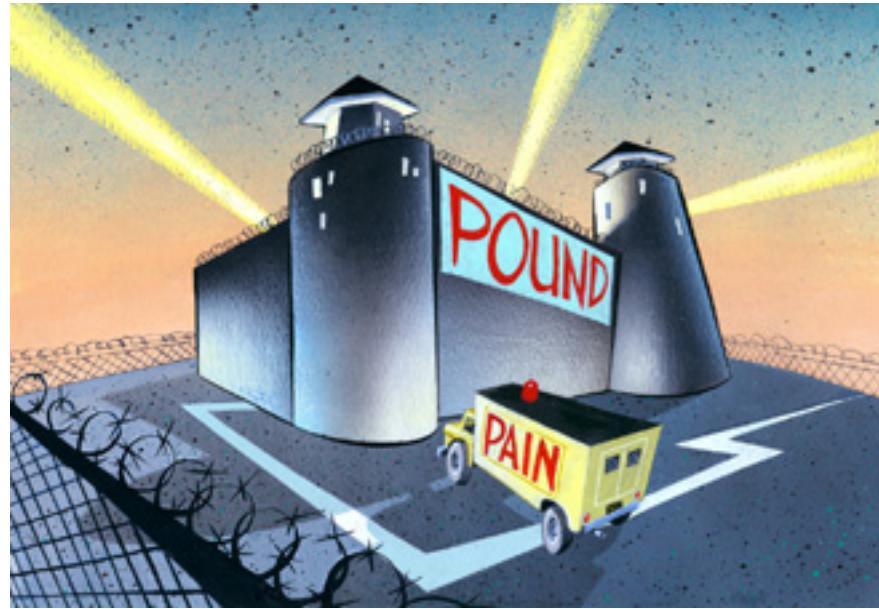
Abstract splotchy backgrounds
became standard in cartoons
after 1990's "Big House Blues".

Failing the Focus Test

We delivered the pilot to Vanessa, who loved it, and she took it to an official focus group testing where it was played alongside many other pilots. A couple days later when she called, she sounded pretty low. I asked what had happened thinking our pilot would have done better than the rest for the mere reason that we tried to entertain instead of be good for you, which was a radical concept in the 1980s.

She said, "Well, you didn't do so well. You got low marks in many of the categories." I wondered how many categories could there be for kids watching cartoons.

"The kids didn't like the cutting," she explained, along with some other strange areas of criticism that I didn't think kids even knew about. "So I guess you aren't going to pick up the series then?" I asked. "I am, but I had to fight for it," Vanessa said. "I love the characters, despite strong evidence that kids didn't respond well to the filmic aspects of the production. And there was one category where you beat everybody else, hands down."

"What was that?" I asked.

"The kids laughed a lot more at your cartoon than the others."

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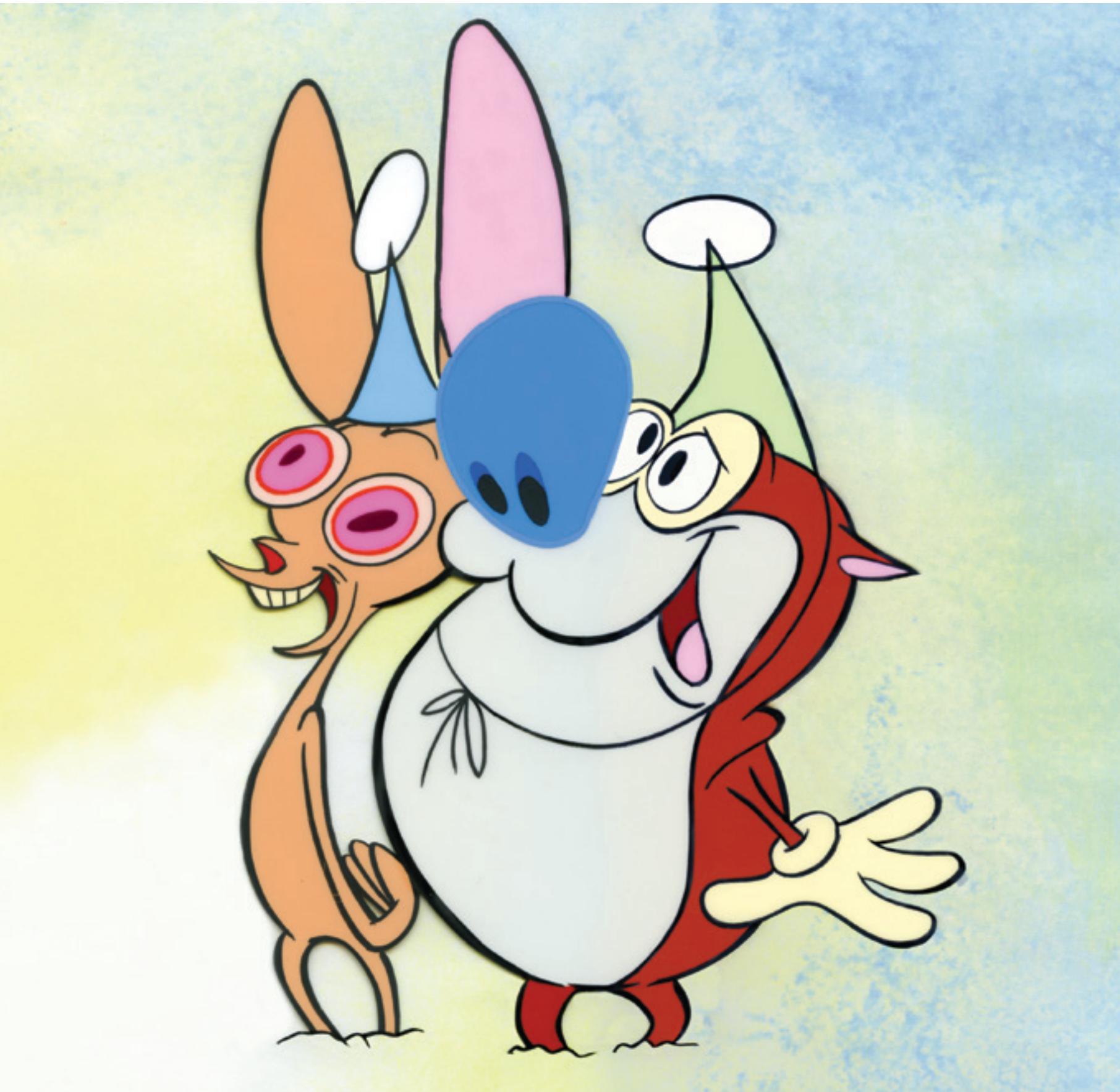
The Ren & Stimpy Show

Nickelodeon ordered six half-hour episodes of *Ren & Stimpy* from us; about half the amount they ordered of their other two shows—*Doug* and *Rugrats*. They were still worried that our show might be too weird for their audience.

Putting a crew together in 1990 was not that hard to do. I was already partnered with Jim Smith, Lynne Naylor, and Bob Camp. Everyone in the business knew what we were up to, and once we landed the series, lots of cartoonists wanted on board, especially because most cartoons being made at the time were controlled by "writers" and executives, and weren't much fun to draw. I picked some artists who had worked with me on *Mighty Mouse* and *Beany and Cecil* but there were also some recent graduates from CalArts that wanted to have some laughs.

Bob Camp's faux-historical drawing of Ren.

My model sheet for Ren.
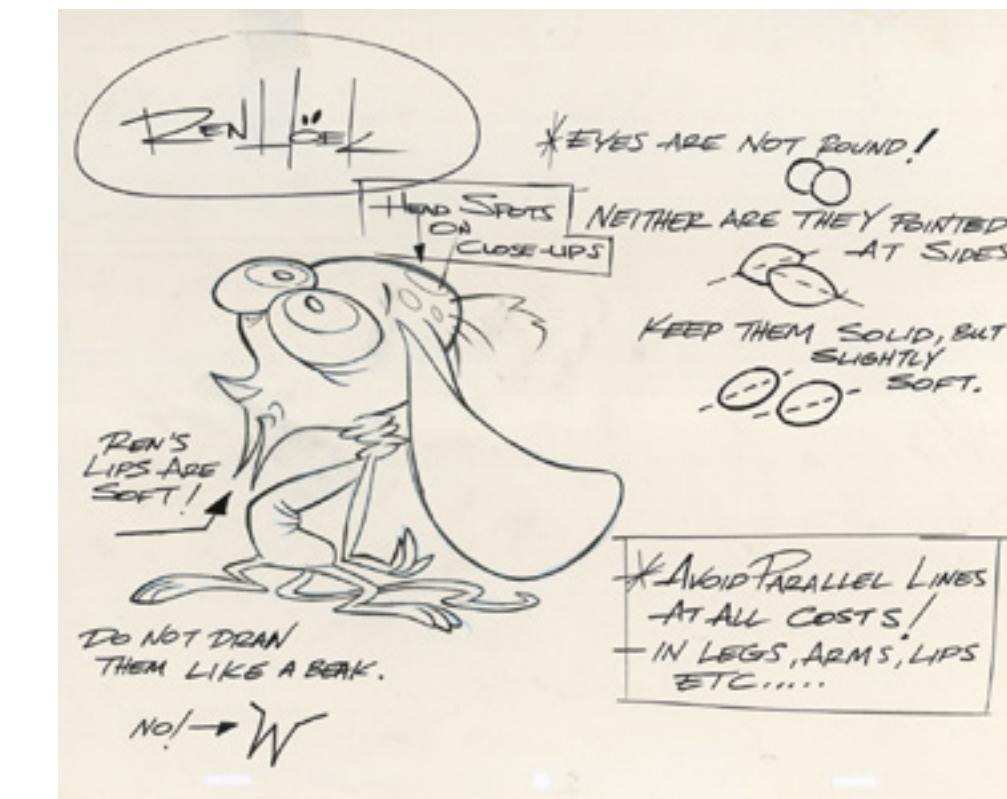
A naseous Stimpy drawn by Vincent Waller.

Maintaining Guts

Our first challenge on the show wasn't so much in finding people to fill a new studio, but to get the cartoonists to learn control and discipline, and in particular to learn the main tenet of my philosophy: DO NOT TONE DOWN THE WORK THAT IS HANDED TO YOU.

There are so many steps in making a cartoon that you are in constant danger of losing the message of the original idea. When you copy something someone else has done, you have to fight a strong natural tendency to lose important detail in each successive generation; this is a problem with even the most talented artists.

A storyboard artist may draw rough sketchy poses that have a lot of life to them, and then the layout artist, who is next in line, copies those drawings bigger and tighter—and if he is not on his toes, can tone the poses down and lose some life and humor. Then the animator (usually in Asia) gets the layouts and tones them down further. Then the key animation drawings are handed to the assistant animator who takes it down another notch. By the time the cartoon is finished it looks as bland as everything else.

My challenge was, and always is, to fight this problem. Artists who are used to working in studios that encourage blandness often have a very tough time adapting to my opposite procedure.

Ren & Stimpy Layouts

One way I combated this problem was to modify the way layouts were used in creating cartoons. In most studios, the layout department's job is to create drawings of backgrounds and then stage the characters within them. This usually means drawing one or two poses of the characters to place them within the environment, but layouts aren't used to pose out the acting of the characters. That job was traditionally left to the animators.

This system worked fine from the 1930s to the 1950s because all the animators were highly skilled artists who sat in a room next to the director and layout artist. However by the 1970s American studios were sending animation overseas to unskilled laborers who had learned only basic formulas of how to get a character to move from one pose to another. Sending animation overseas was bad enough, but in the middle of the 1980s they started sending layouts overseas too. As a result there was no department left where you could control the direction or acting in TV cartoons.

Acting and Poses

I had pioneered the use of layouts to do all the acting poses—first on *The Jetsons*, then on *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*, and again on *Beany and Cecil*. Each show proved that this practice gave a director more control over the style and acting of the cartoons. If you couldn't do the animation in-house, at least you could control the key poses and make your characters have interesting expressions.

If I had to choose one job in the production that is key to the "style" of our cartoons, it would be layout. That's where we draw the entertainment that you see on the screen. Much of the humor in Spümcø cartoons comes not only from what the characters say, but how the characters act—the faces they make, the poses they strike.

By the time I started *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, I was an old hand at this type of layout, but not everyone else was. So there was constant training throughout the production of the series, which was a big challenge.
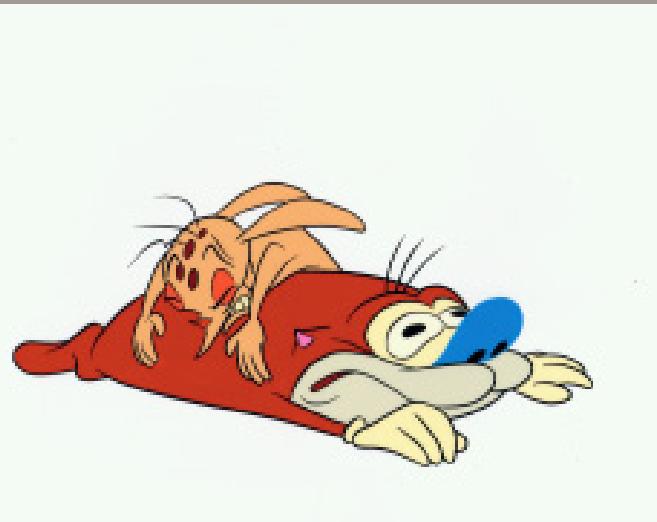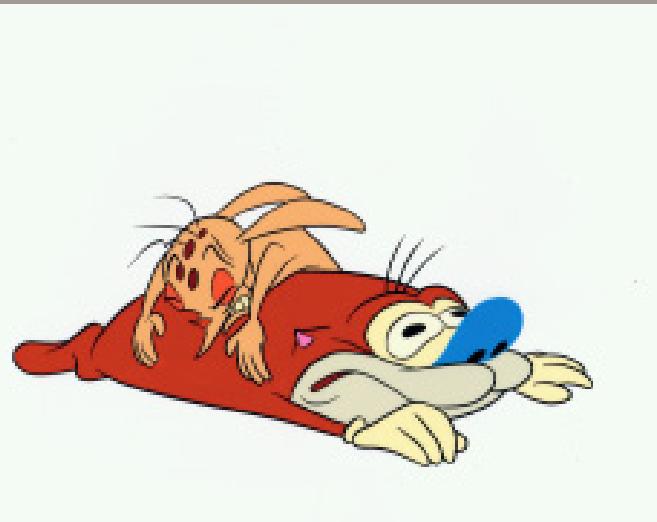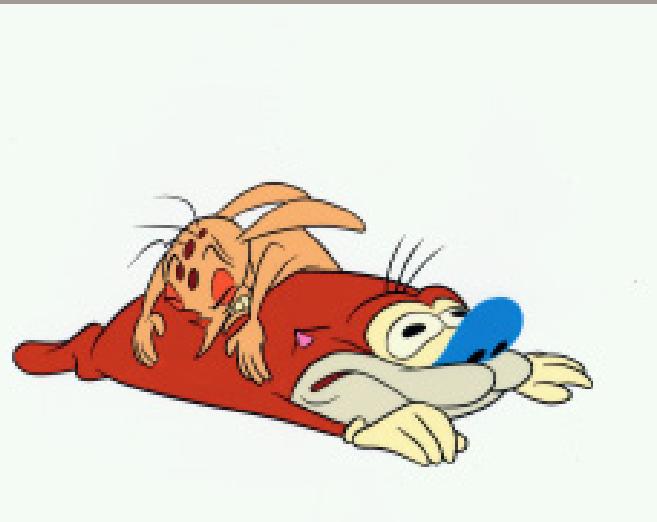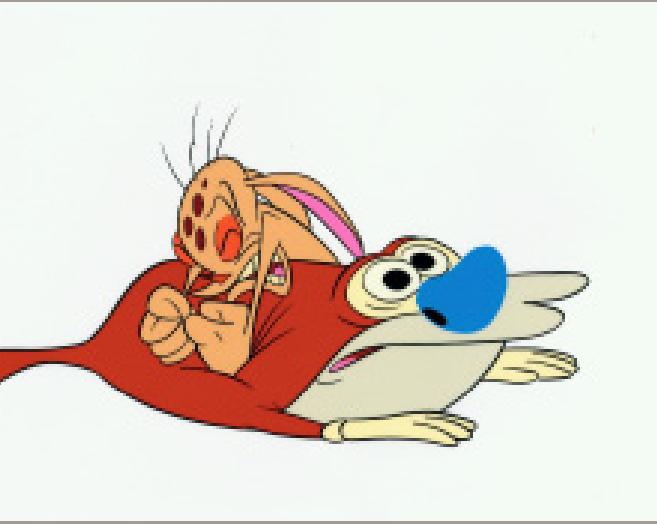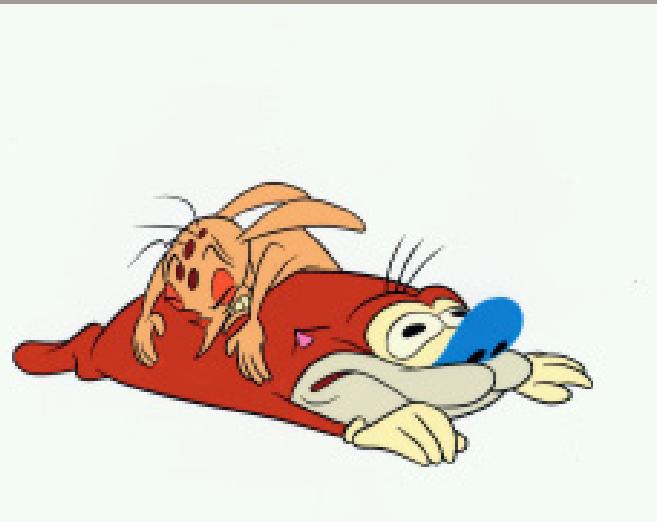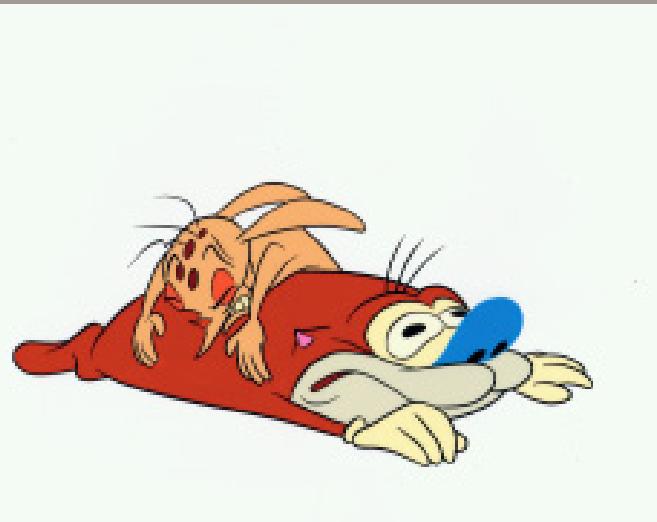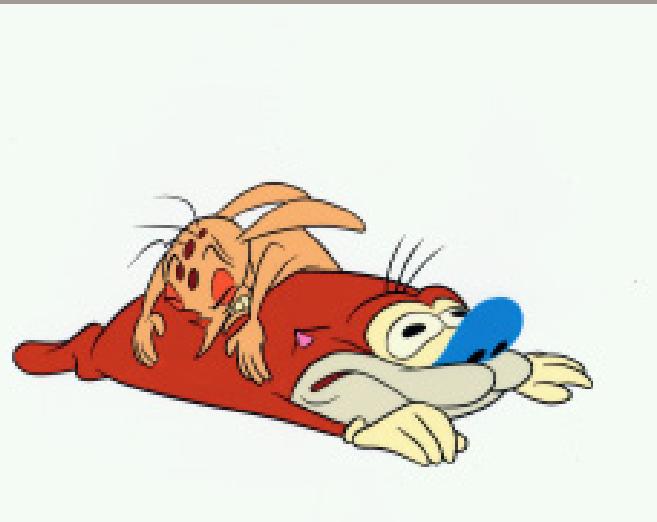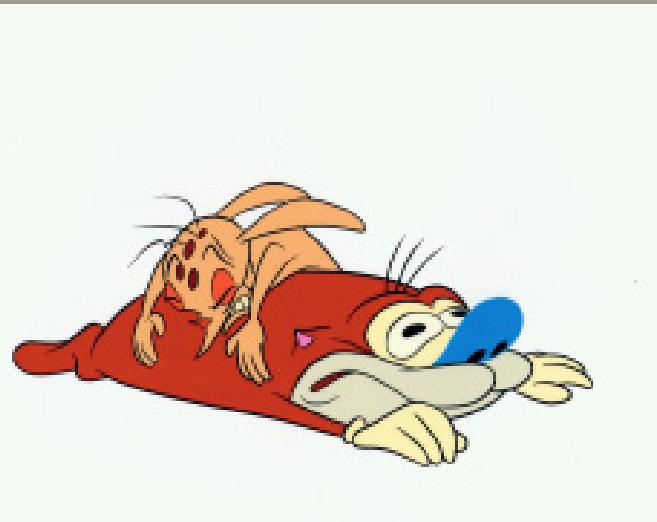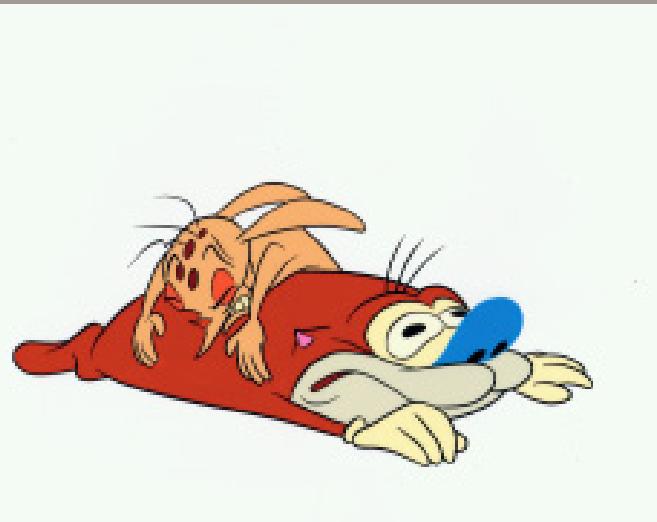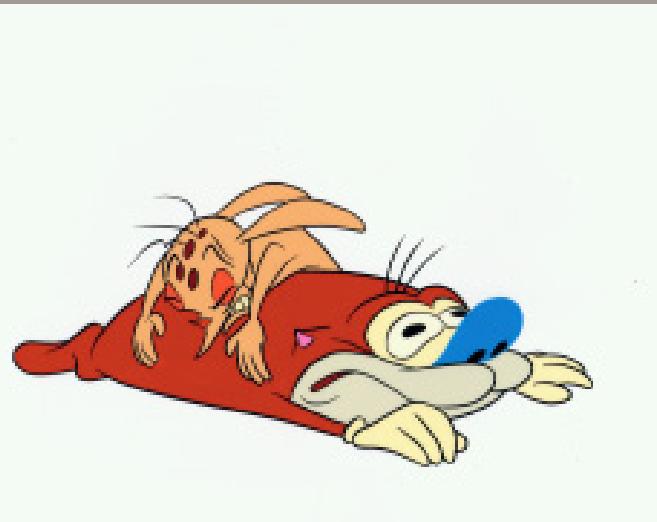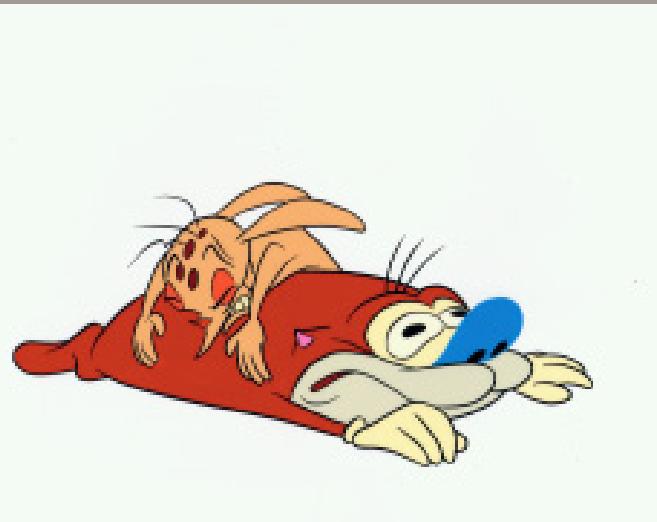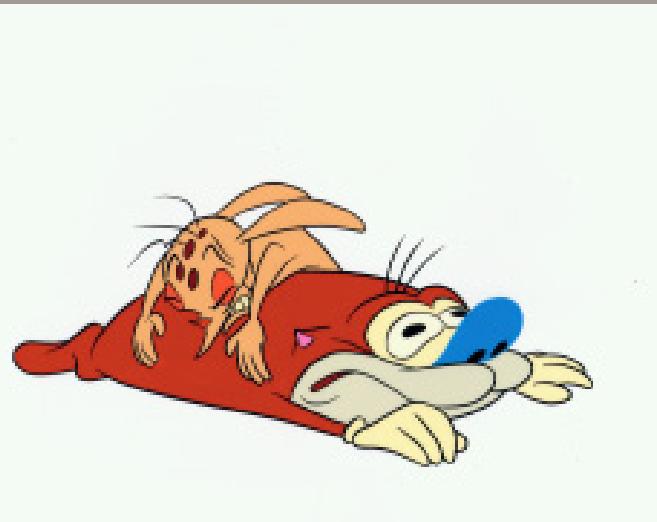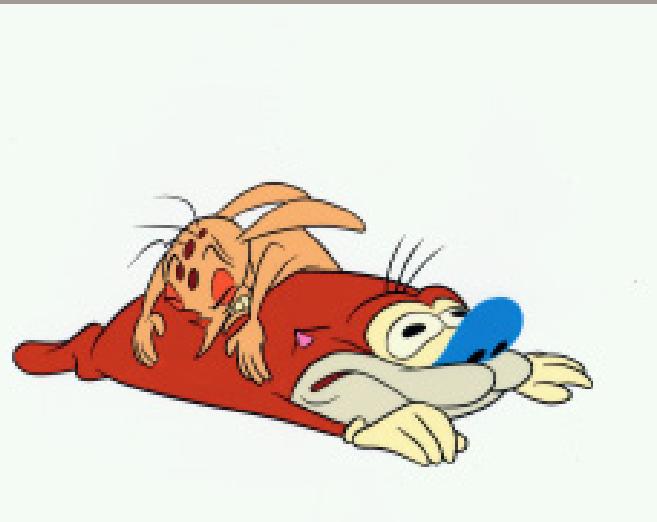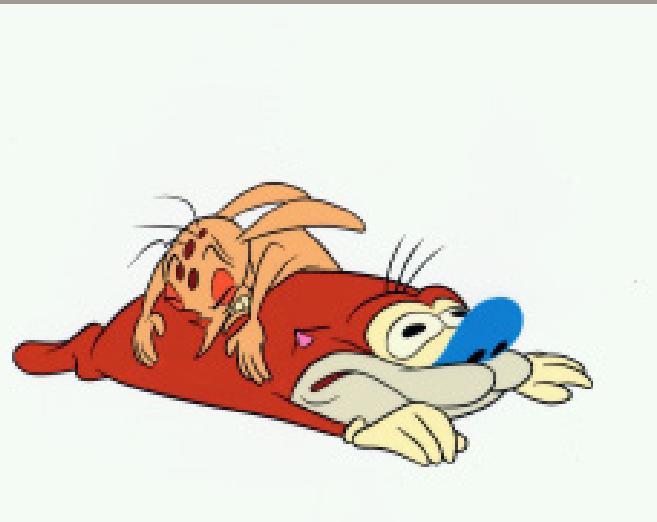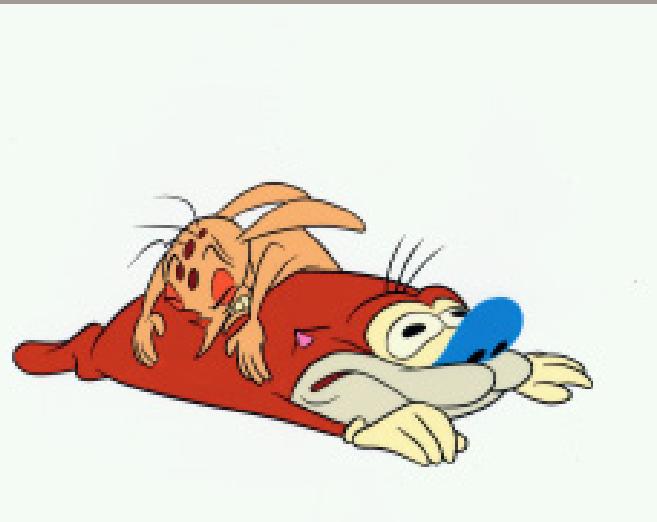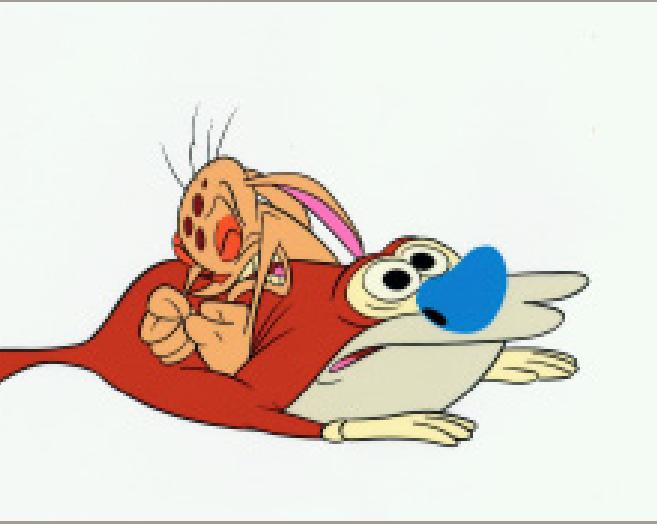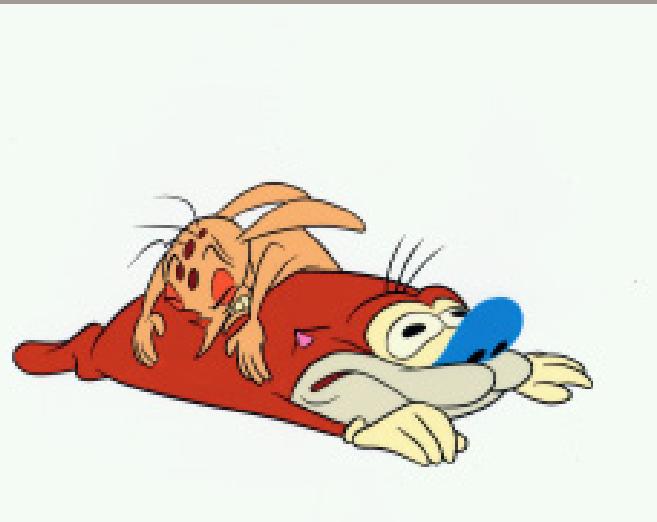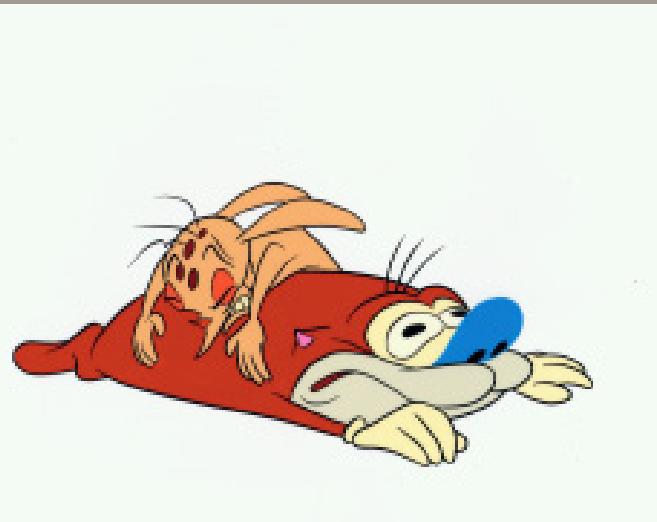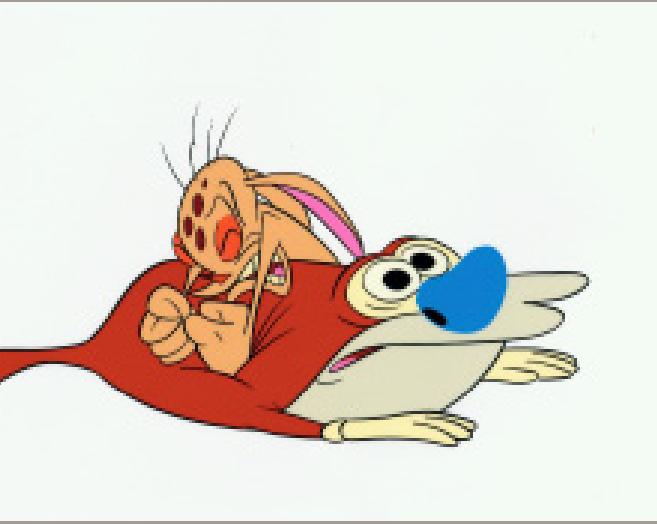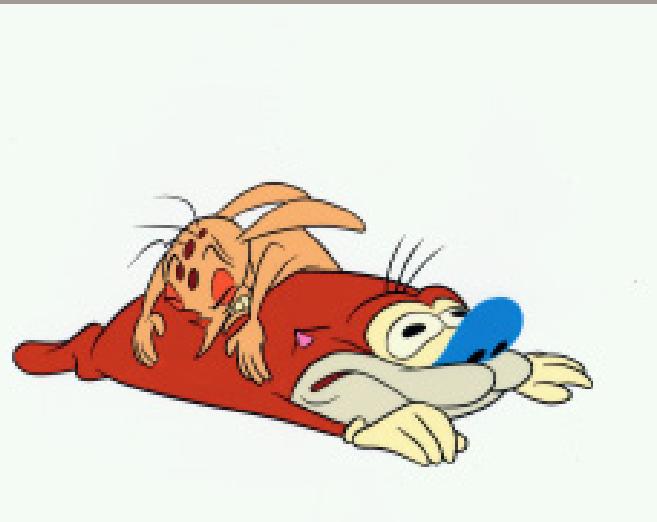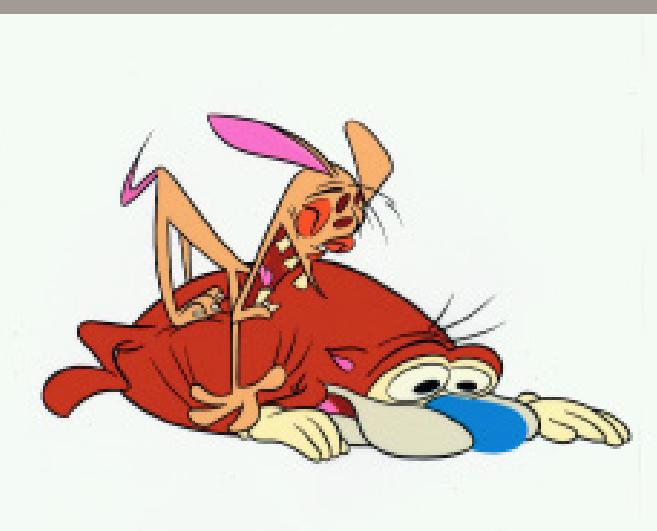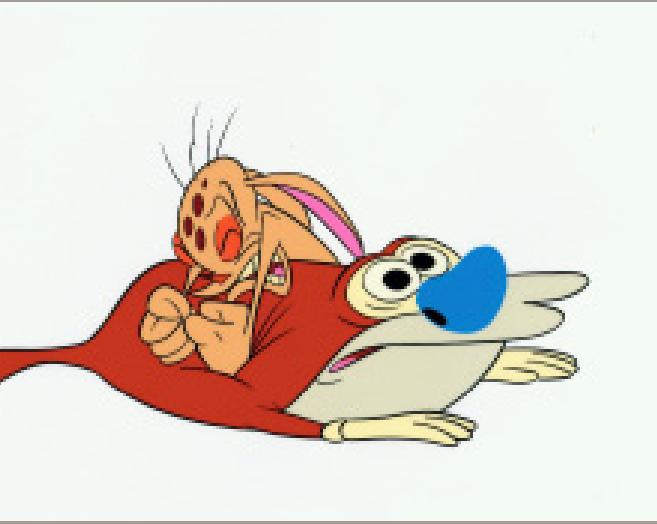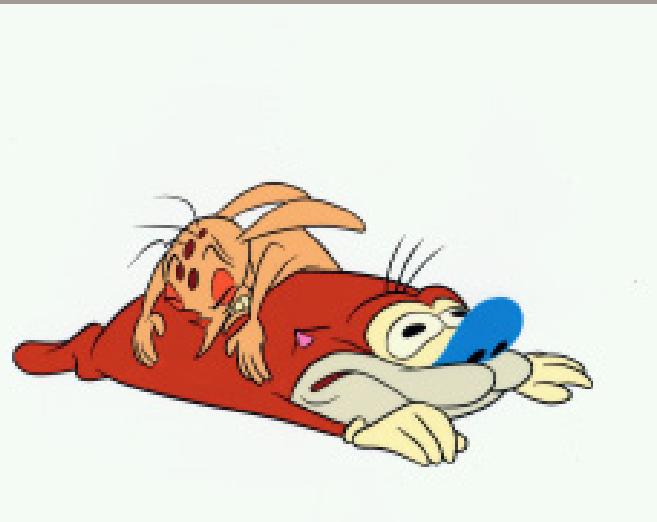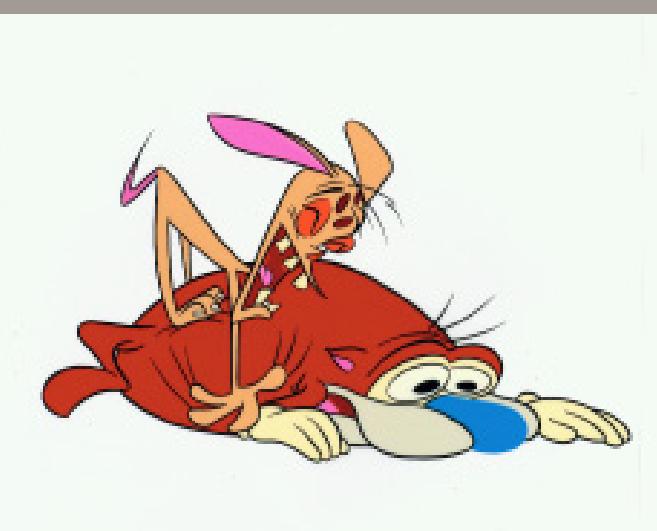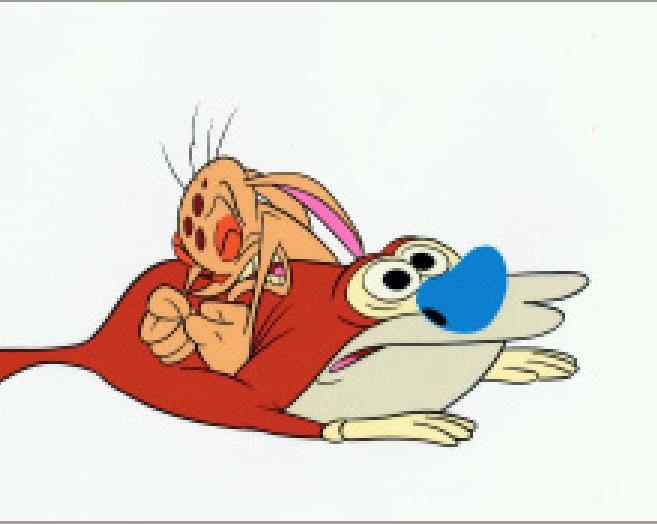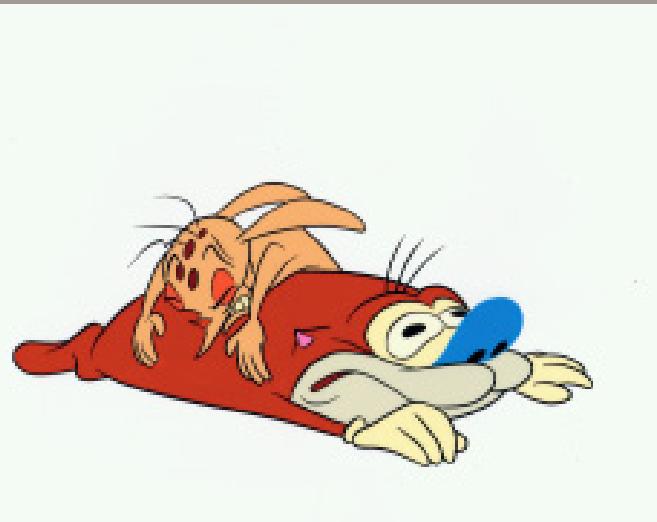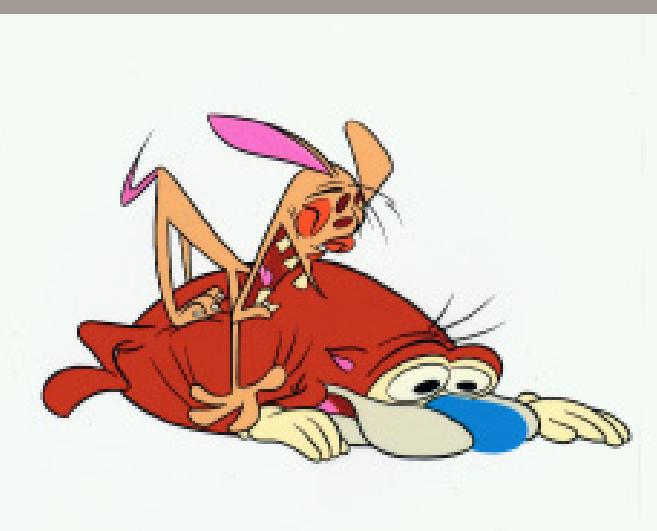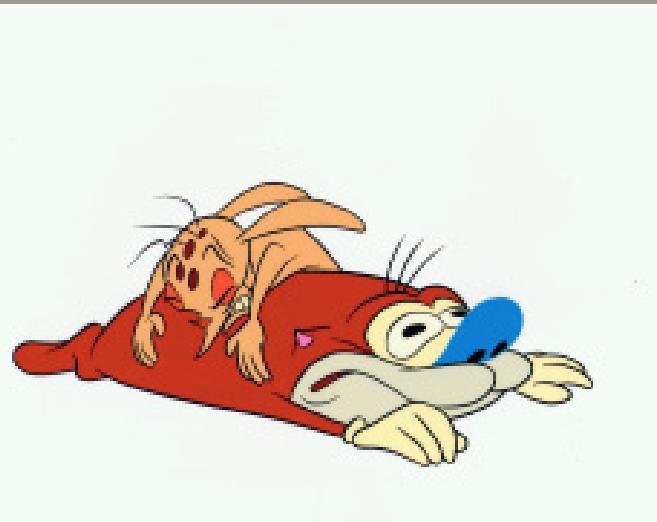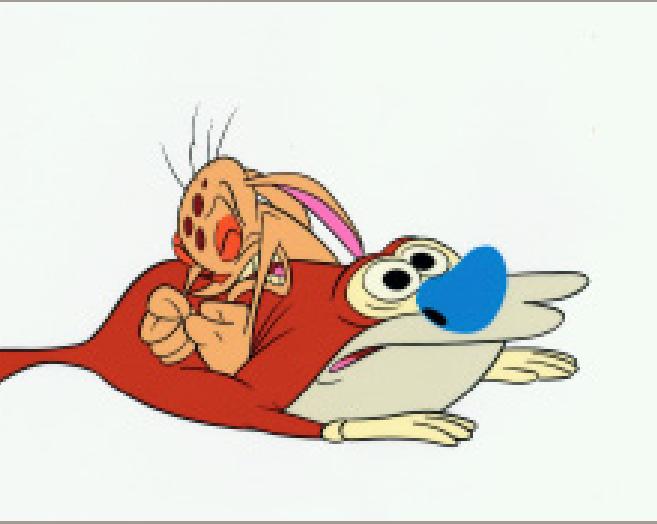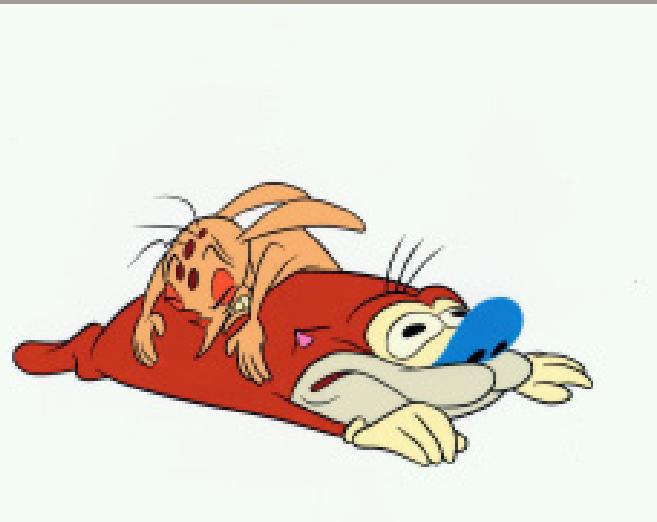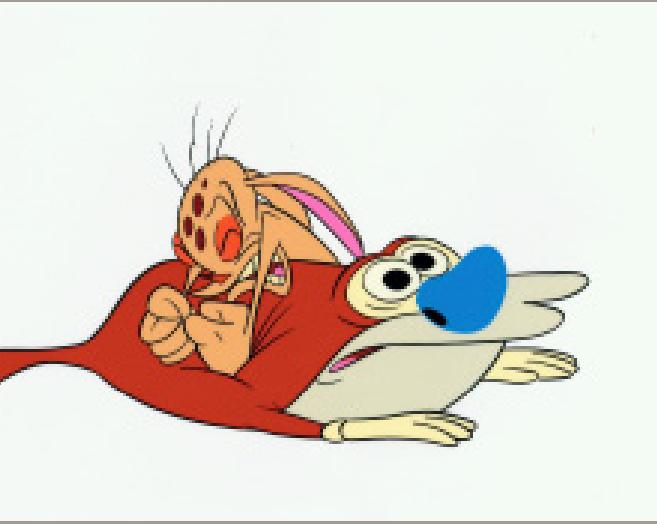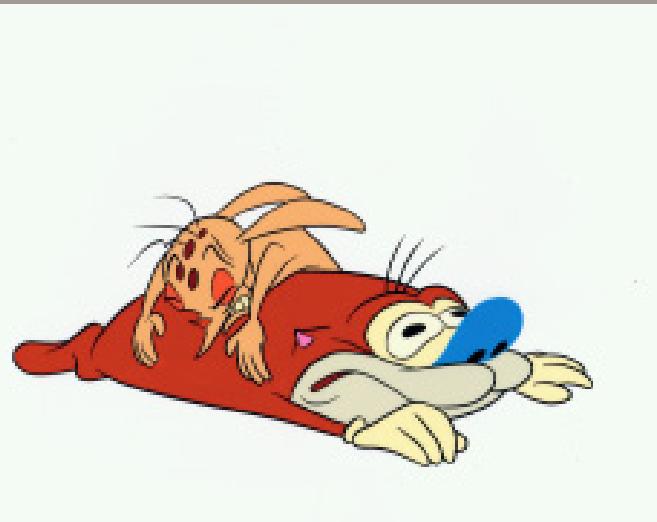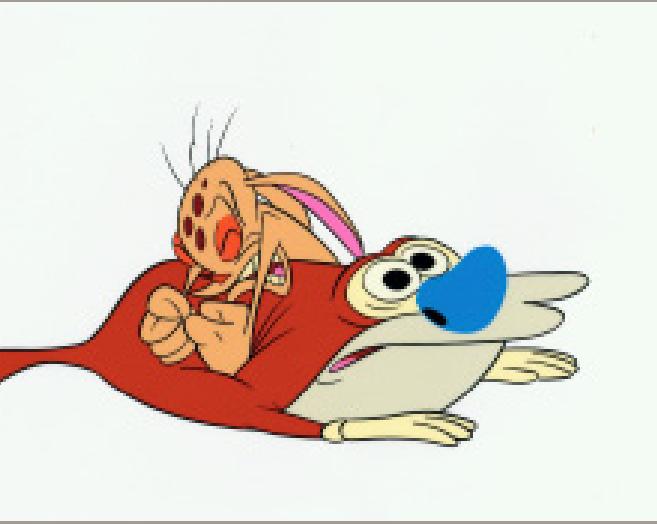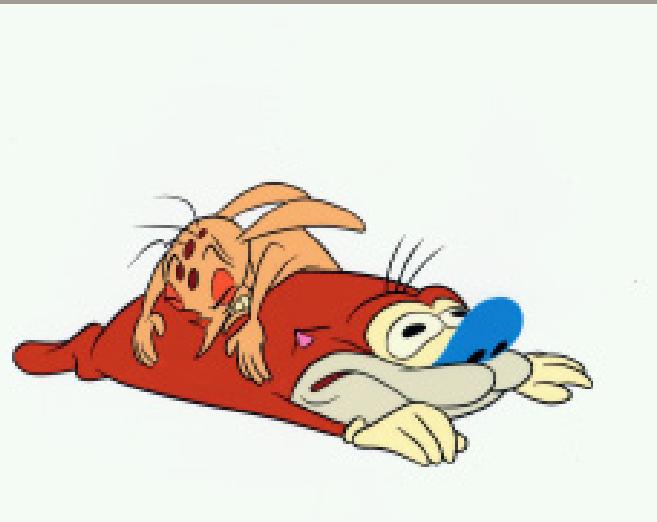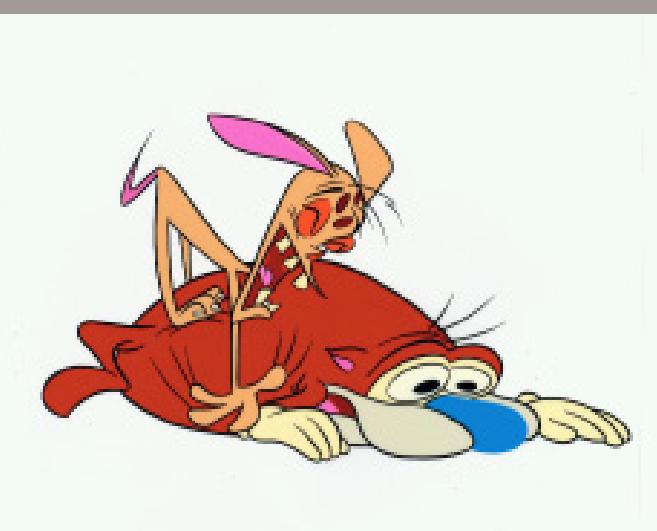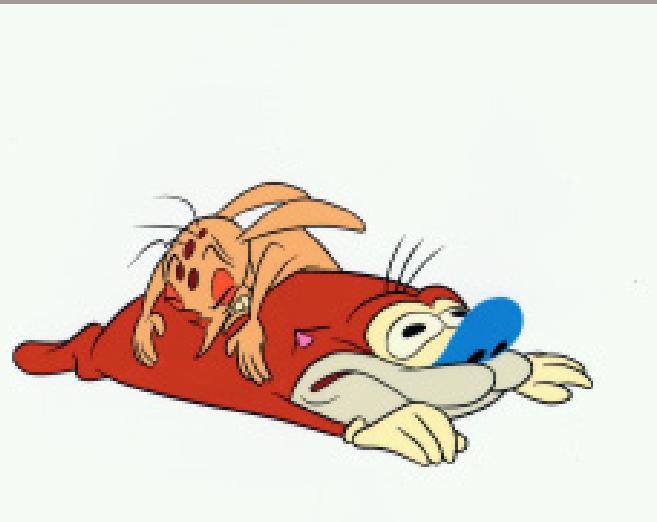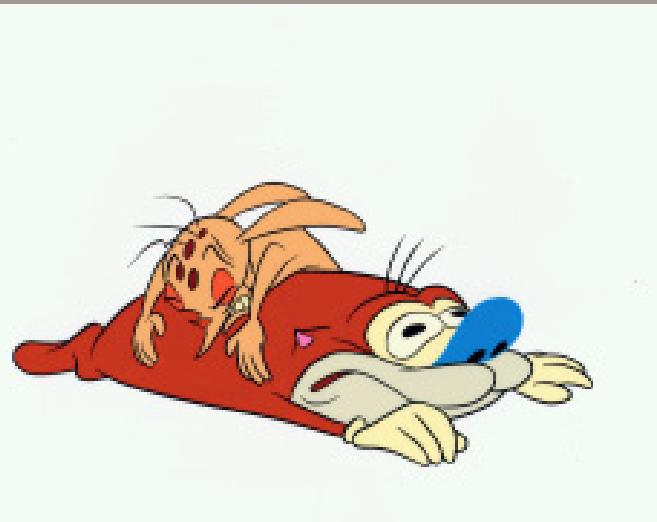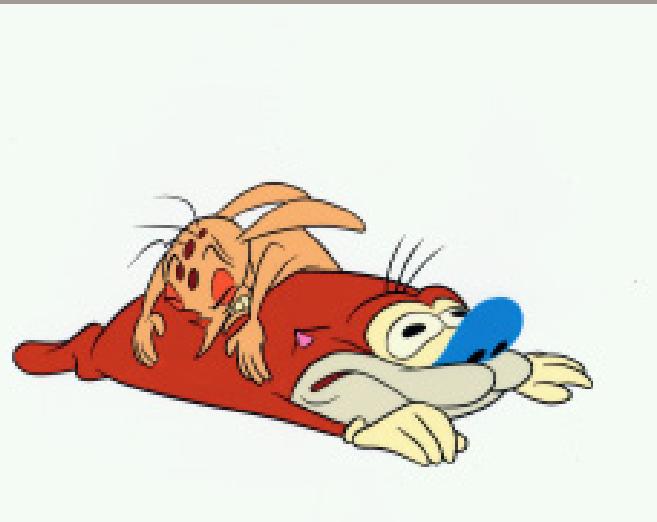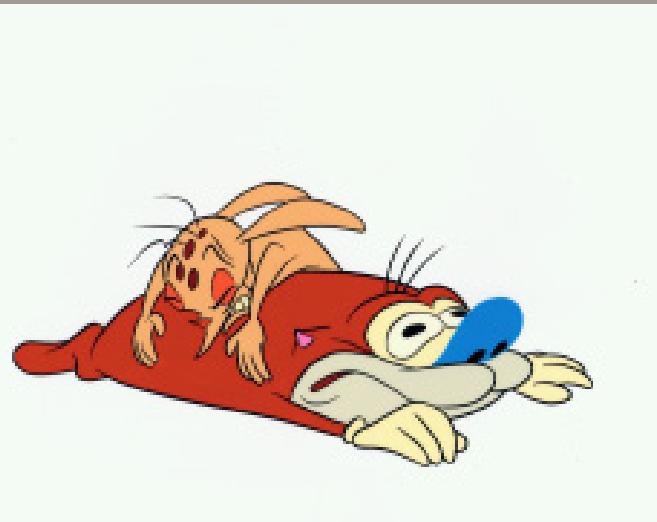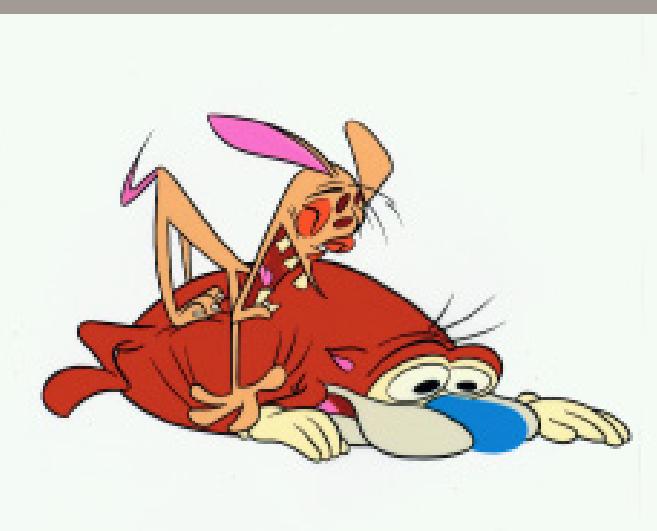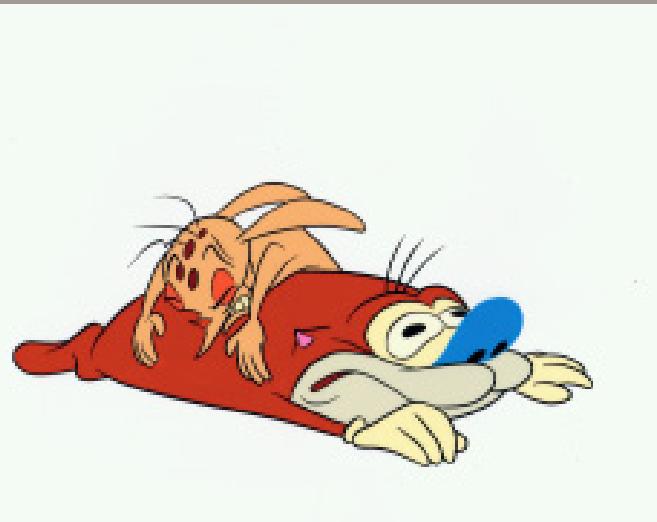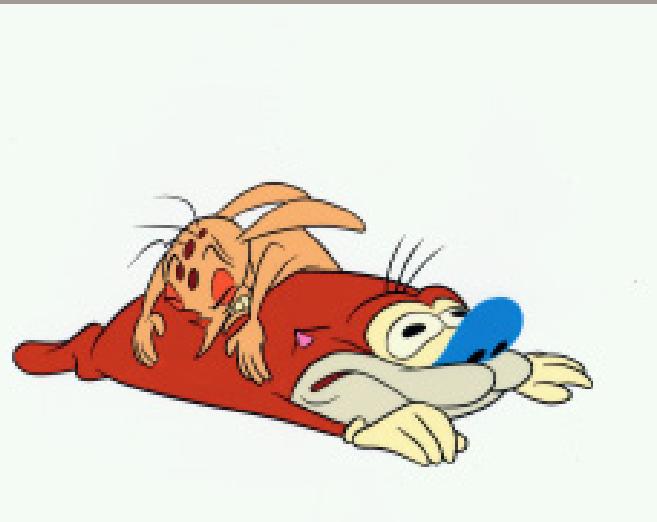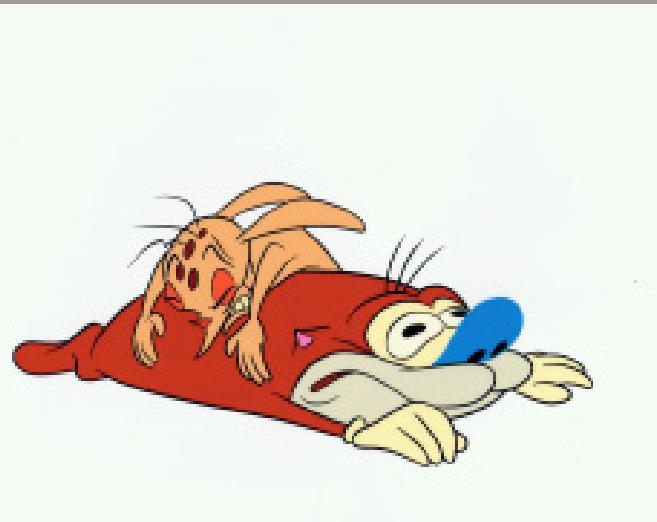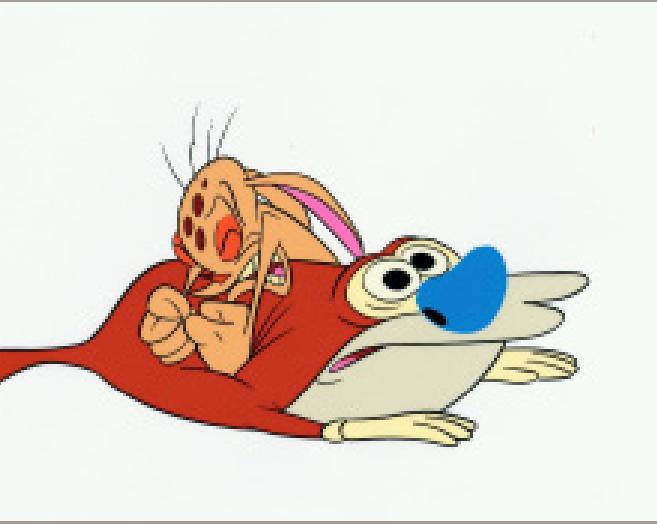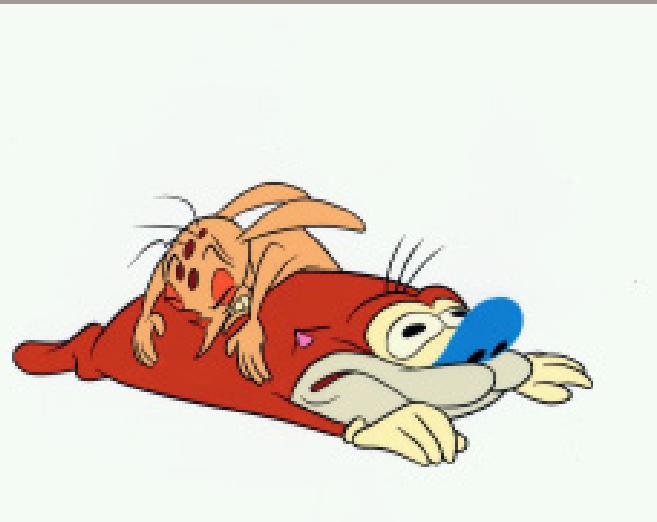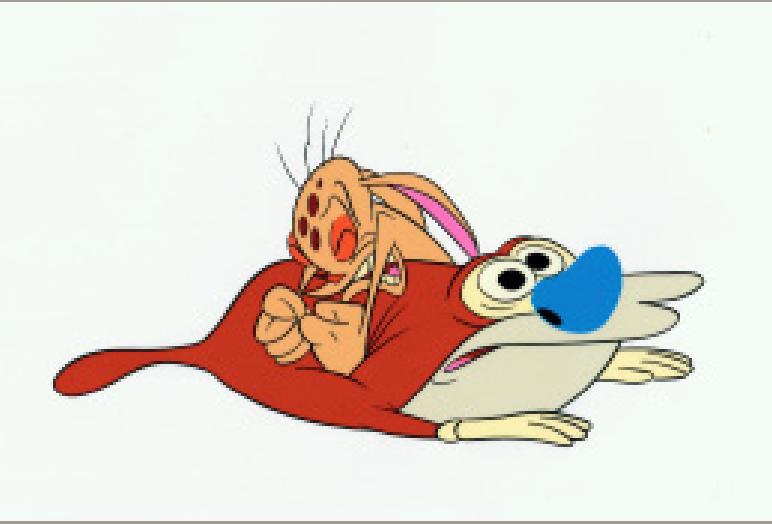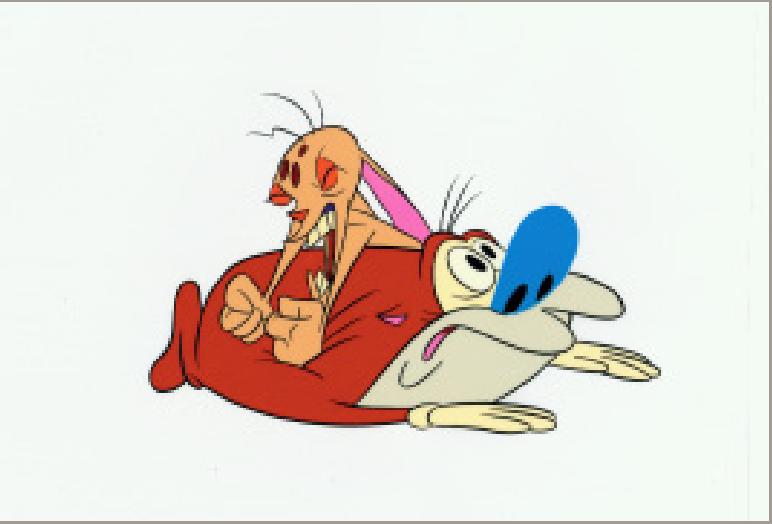
The Art of "Giving Notes"

As confident as Vanessa was in *Ren & Stimpy* and me, her superiors wanted some kind of creative control over our stories, and appointed an in-network "story editor," Mitchell Kriegman, who didn't know anything about cartoons and didn't even seem to like them. He wasn't actually the story editor; I was, but they didn't know what else to call him. "Censor" doesn't look good in the credits.

Once Mitchell started reading our story premises and outlines, things became more heated. He seemed to hate all the best parts, mainly because he didn't understand them.

Mitchell explains the process of making cartoons to us with copious notes

STIMPY'S BACKWARDS EUROPEAN NATION [Nick. scrapped this show] November 30, 1990.

"CHANGE [LOCALE TO TRAILOR. THE HOUSE IS] NOT RIGHT, HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH SERIES."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"DO THEY HAVE STAIRS? INCONSISTANT LOCATION."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"TONE DOWN REN'S REACTIONS...TOO EXTREME. [THE HAPPY HELMET] IS SUPPOSED TO MAKE HIM HAPPY, NOT CRAZY. HE SHOULD START NORMAL AND BUILD UP TO A SMILE."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"LOSE THE DUCK, CHANGE TO WOODPECKER."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"CHANGE DIALOGUE FROM 'YOU SICK LITTLE MONKEY.' SAY SOMETHING LIKE 'TAKE IT OFF OF ME THIS INSTANT. YOU AND YOUR CRAZY INVENTIONS."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"REPLACE 'LICKING STIMPY' WITH NEW SEQUENCE."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"CAN'T SAY ['I LOVE BEING] PISSED.'"
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS May 28, 1991.

"LIVING ROOM BACKGROUND IS FINE, BUT REMOVE PHOTO OF GEORGE LIQUOR."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS June 5, 1991.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE BEAVER? ALSO, WOODPECKER DOESN'T WORK."

"MUST REMOVE [REN'S ROLLED UP] NEWSPAPER.
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS June 5, 1991.

"REN SHOULD NOT BE DRAWN SO ABSTRACTLY."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS June 5, 1991.

"STIMPY CAN'T LICK UNDERWEAR."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS June 5, 1991.

"REN SHOULDN'T BE SO UGLY."
STIMPY'S INVENTIONS June 5, 1991.

"HOW COULD STIMPY BE IN THE POUCH IF HE IS THE POUCH?"
BLACK HOLE JUNE 5, 1991.

ROBIN HOEK February 25, 1991.

"THE SONG: CAN'T SAY ROTTING BEEF CARCASSES."
ROYAL CANADIAN KILTED YAKSMEN February 22, 1991.

"I SCRATCHED MY HEAD WHEN I READ THE 'POISONED DIRT' SCENE."
ROYAL CANADIAN KILTED YAKSMEN February 22, 1991.

"VANESSA WANTS TO KILL MAGIC BOOGERS."
GOODBYE II February 20, 1991.

"MAKE DAMN SURE ONLY ONE OF REN'S NOSTRILS IS RUNNING IN THAT CLOSE UP OF HIS SICKLY NOSE."
NURSE STIMPY February 25, 1991.

"TOO GROTESQUE. IT WILL SPAWN A YEAR OF NIGHTMARES. February ASK DR. STUPID IN WHICH WORMS GROW OUT OF SIMPY'S GUMHOLES February 25, 1991.

"IF STIMPY TURNS OFF THE GRAVITY FOR REN'S BATH WHY DOESN'T EVERYTHING FLOAT INCLUDING STIMPY?"
SPACE MADNESS February 25, 1991.

"ALL THE 'JOHNNY' DIALOGUE WAS DEEMED TOO INACCESSIBLE."
SPACE MADNESS December 5, 1990.

"[CHANGE 'I NEED SOME REAL FOOD' LINE] NOT SO CRAZY. PULL BACK THE SCREAMING."
SPACE MADNESS May 20, 1991.

"DROP THE HISTORY ERASER BUTTON. WE'LL NEED A NEW ENDING."
SPACE MADNESS December 5, 1990.

"REN CAN'T EAT SOAP"
SPACE MADNESS December 5, 1990.

"WANT TO SEE MORE SQUASH AND SQUISH ACTION."
SPACE MADNESS February 28, 1991.

"[THIS EPISODE] FALLS OUTSIDE OF OUR CORPORATE COMFORT LEVEL"
STIMPY'S PREGNANT [Nick. scrapped this show]
December 14, 1991.

"CAN'T DO [FAKE] COMMERCIALS IN THE MIDDLE OF A STORY."
UNTAMED WORLD November 30, 1990.

"EGG DROP SPLORT ACTION DEEMED TOO OFFENSIVE FOR OUR SENSITIVE VIEWERS."
UNTAMED WORLD April 19, 1990.

"WE DON'T BUY THAT THEY BECOME GOATHERDS"

"Kids Don't Like Boogers and Farts"

Whenever I pitched story ideas to Vanessa directly, she usually loved them. She would laugh and cry in all the right places, and make good suggestions to warm up the characters. I had a great relationship with her. We traded needs. I wanted to get some gross stuff in the cartoons, like boogers and farts, and she wanted more sentimental stories so we figured out a bartering system. She went, "Eww, that's gross," at gags like the "Magic Nose Goblins," and asked, "Do we have to have that in there?" And I would say, "Don't think only of your own tastes, Vanessa. Think of the kids. Let's be like Santa and give them what they want. No other network will, so if we do, we'll get the best ratings." She said, "But kids don't like boogers and farts!" which made me wonder whether she'd ever met a kid. But to be fair, she was very willing to bend, even on some things that were not to her taste, which made her my favorite (and the smartest) executive I've ever worked with.
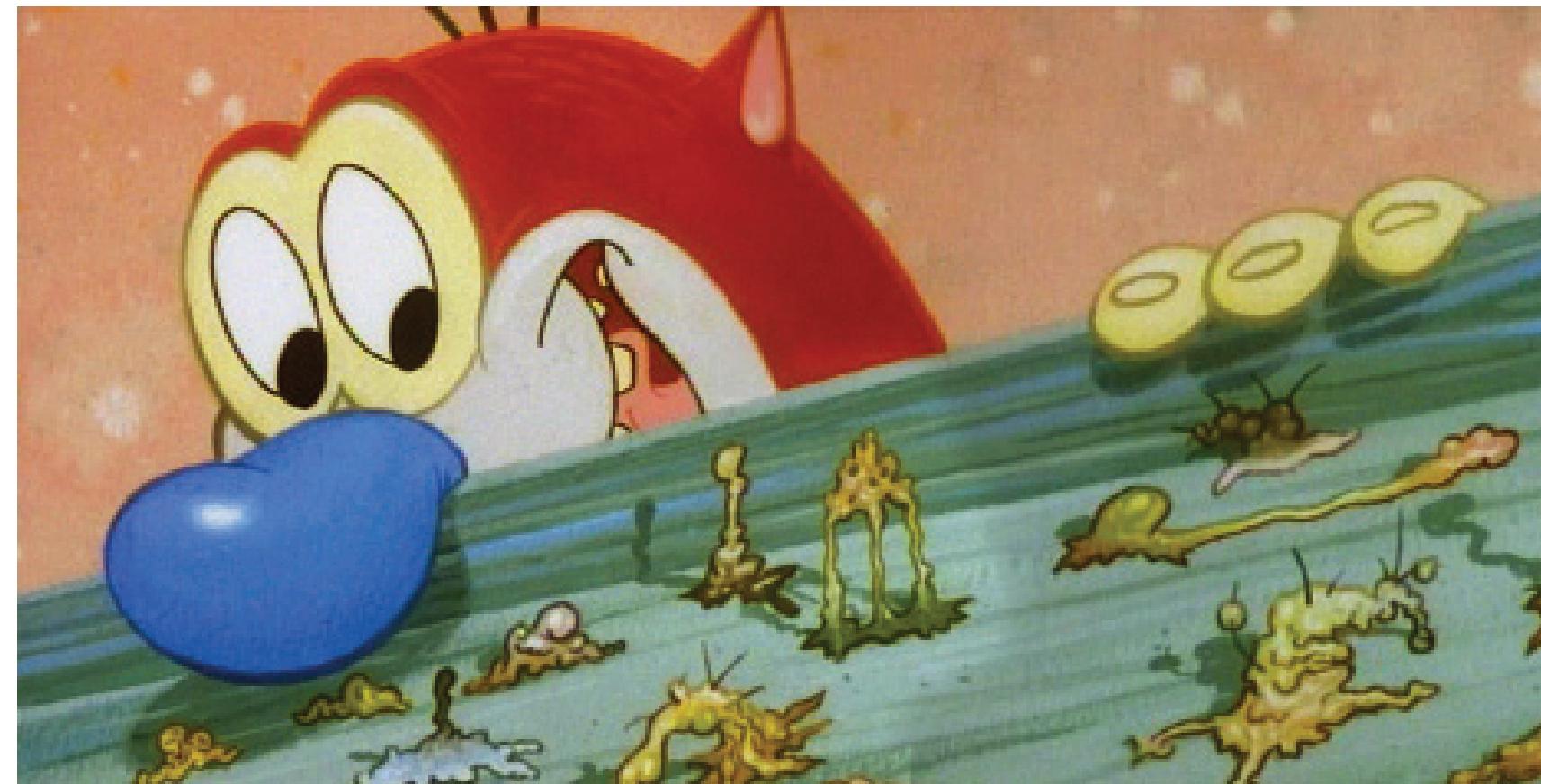
The horrific magic nose goblins, 1992.

"Fake Dad"

One of the sentimental stories that I crafted especially for Vanessa was called "Fake Dad." We wrote an outline for a story about Stimpy convincing Ren that Ren has so much love in him that it's his duty to share it with others and not just Stimpy. Ren agrees to go down to the "Fake Dad" service that provides "big-brother" types to unfortunate youths and orphans who have never experienced quality time with an older male figure.

Vanessa loved the idea. She went on and on about it every time we spoke and got the story editor off my back for a short while.

Even though I had already done a scribble of Kowalski the Orphan—who looked like an oafish Don Martin character—a big, hulking three-time loser with a five o'clock shadow, a lollipop, and a look of murderous intent etched across his face, I hadn't sent the sketch in when I faxed the story outline to Vanessa because it was so rough, but I did a few days later. She got the fax and then that afternoon we got a call. "Uh . . . John . . . is this the little kid that Ren is a big brother to?"

"Yes, isn't he funny?" I asked.

"Uh . . . how old is he?"

"Three-and-a-half."

Just then I heard Mitchell burst in on the other line: "You see Vanessa? He has tricks! He's trying to make the pictures funny!"

I had to spend half an hour trying to explain that Kowalski looking like a man instead of a little kid was the joke. Story editors that don't draw absolutely hate when you answer a question or an objection with, "That's the joke." They hate it!
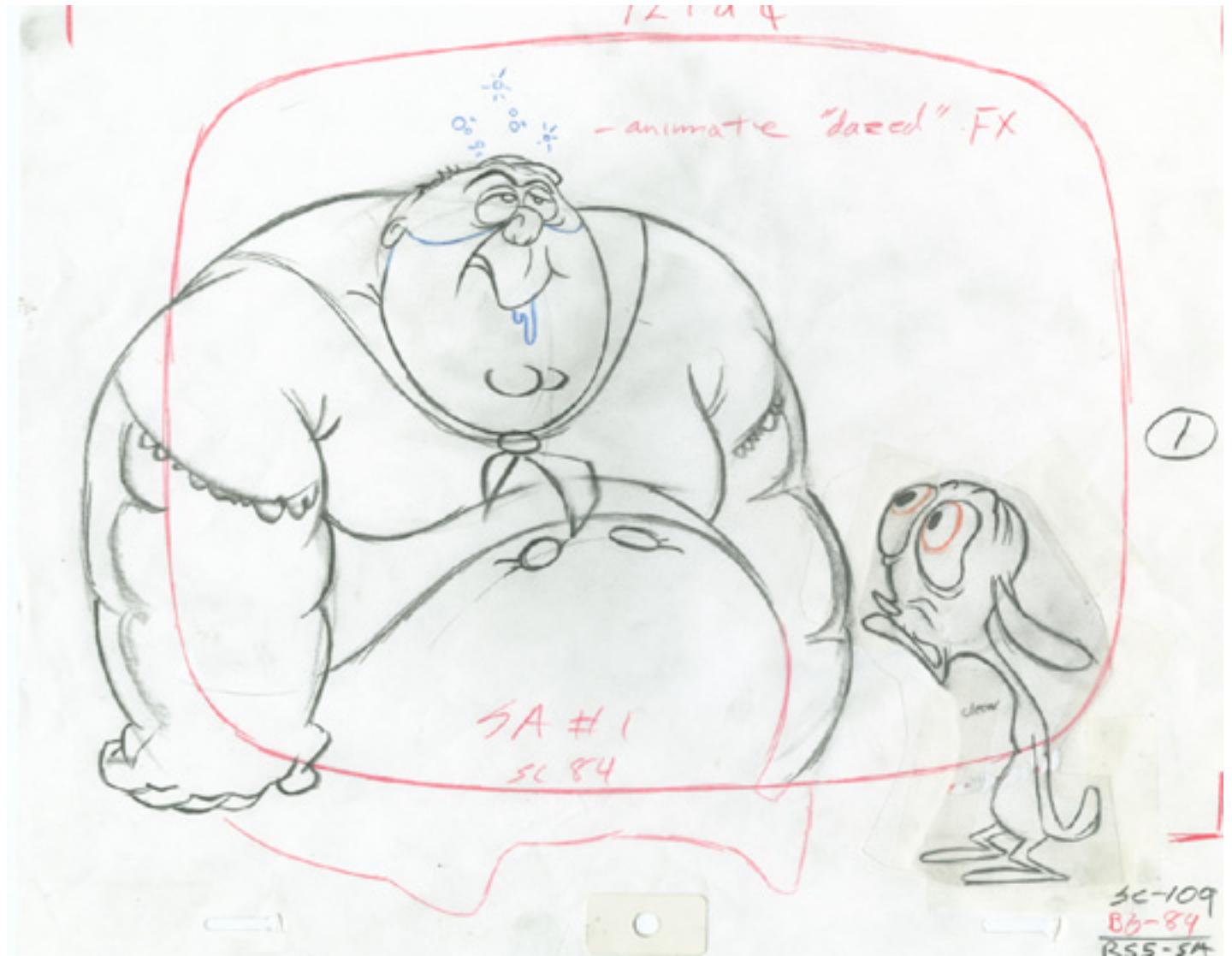
Layout drawing and painting of Kowalski, a 3-year-old felon who needs Ren's love, from "Fake Dad", 1993.

How Did They Get Into Space

I remember sending Vanessa a story outline that had a scene where we cut to a close up of one of the characters, intending it to be like a Basil Wolverton drawing—one of those gross close-ups that later became beloved staples of the show. I didn't think it made sense to describe every detail of the drawing in an outline, so I just wrote, "The picture is the punchline." Mitchell exploded in fury. You should have heard that call. Typically I am diplomatic with my bosses and executives, but this time after listening to about fifteen minutes of screaming, I joined in and started yelling back. Vanessa was on the other line and trying to make peace between us, but Mitchell wouldn't have it. In his world, pictures are not supposed to be funny, only words are, and it drove him nuts that I wanted the pictures to carry some of the humor. So they flew out to Los Angeles to settle things once and for all.

We met in the "space room" which we had painted with a bright red wall and black spatter like a background from one of the cartoons. The room was filled with old-time sound equipment that looked like machines from a *Flash Gordon* serial. Vanessa loved our space room and Mitchell thought it was immature. Vanessa started the meeting politely by beating around the bush. After a few minutes of Mitchell tapping his foot, scowling, and fidgeting, he busted in with, "Hey let's get to the point. This show needs to make more sense!" I asked him why a cartoon needed to make sense, and he got all blubbery. Then I asked him to be more specific. He said, "Well... like... I'm reading all these stories and some of them are kinda funny, but they're really inconsistent. Like, where do Ren and Stimpy live anyway? In one episode, they live in a trailer, in another

they are in the old West, and in the latest one, they're in space. How did they get into space?" I said, "In a rocket." He asked, "Where did they get the rocket?" "I drew it." Then he blew up again and swore that the kids were going to be confused.

All the cartoonists in the room were dumbfounded. One wanted to leap over and beat him up, but we restrained him. I carefully chose my words and patiently explained that in cartoons, and even classic live-action comedy, the characters can exist in any environment. "Bugs Bunny is in the woods in one cartoon, then in space in the next. Same with Laurel and Hardy or The Three Stooges. It's a time-honored tradition. Kids aren't confused by Bugs Bunny always being in a different place."
Mitchell said, "Aha! But that's different!"
"How?" I asked.
"Kids already know who Bugs Bunny is."

I'm sure Mitchell is a personable guy in real life, but he was too much for me. I asked Vanessa to let me do my own stories, and she got him removed from the show.

Soon, however, we had a new "story editor" who also didn't edit the stories. His job was to "give notes." Will McRobb was much nicer than Mitchell though and actually liked the stories we were coming up with... most of them. He questioned things that didn't make logical sense to him or that he thought would get us in trouble or that would scare kids.

The "Space Room" at Spümcø HQ.

Stimpy's Invention

Story Editor Will McRobb thought the episode "Stimpy's Invention" would scare kids and wanted it killed. He somehow convinced Vanessa that it was an evil story, and even though I tried arguing him out of it, he was adamant about this one. "This is a story about *mind control!*" I said, "So?" That wasn't a good argument, I guess.

After Bob Camp finished the storyboard for "Stimpy's Invention" and we thought we had a masterpiece

on our hands, a note came down that the cartoon had to be scrapped. I tried appealing to logic and budgets and schedules. I told Vanessa that if we scrapped this cartoon now, there wouldn't be anything for Carbunkle (the animation studio) to animate, and for the overseas studio to inbetween and paint cels for. It would cause us to be late and therefore go over budget.

Title card and drawings for
"Stimpy's Invention", 1992.
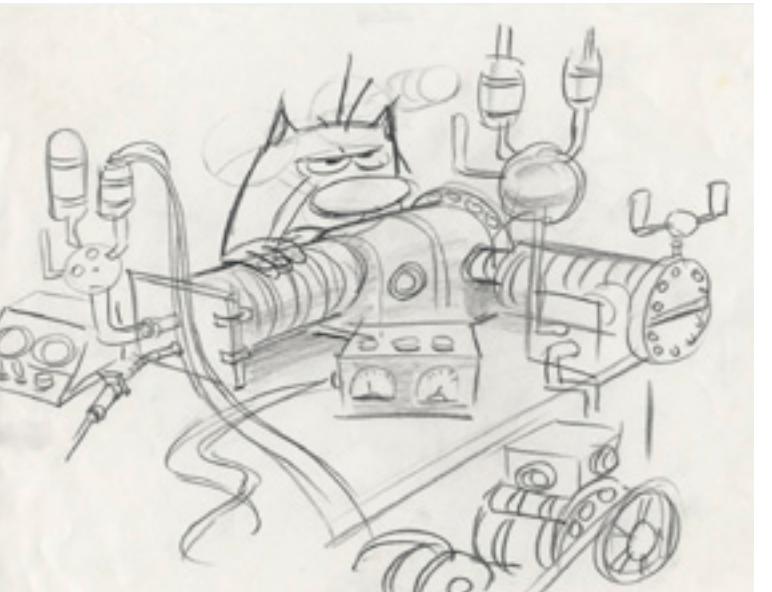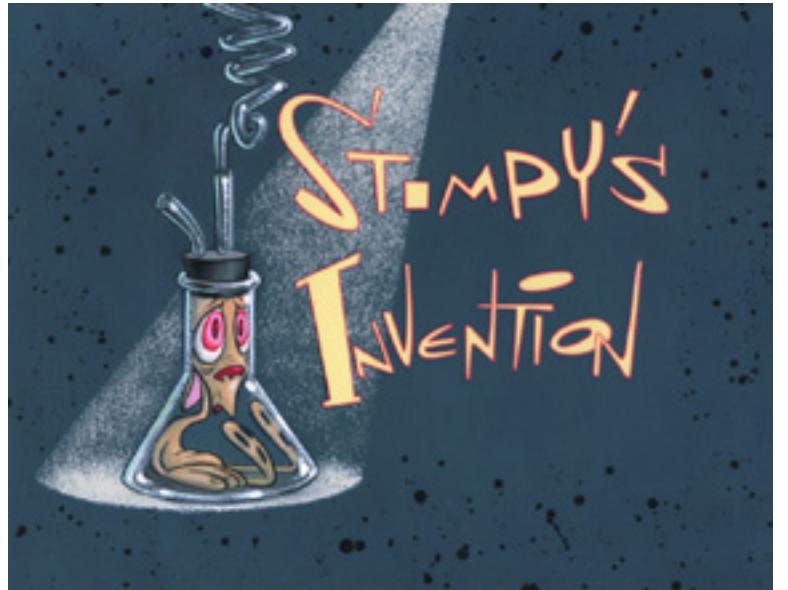
Bob Camp had Ren's personality,
but Stimpy's car.
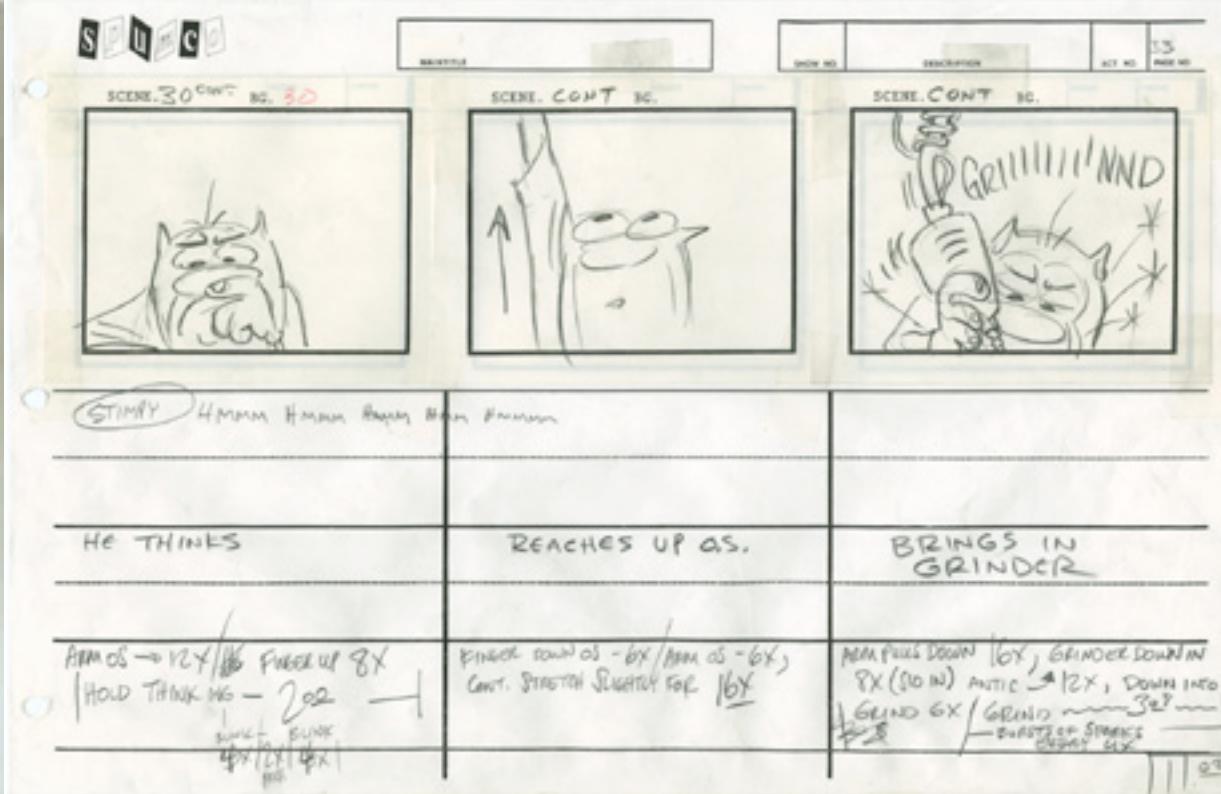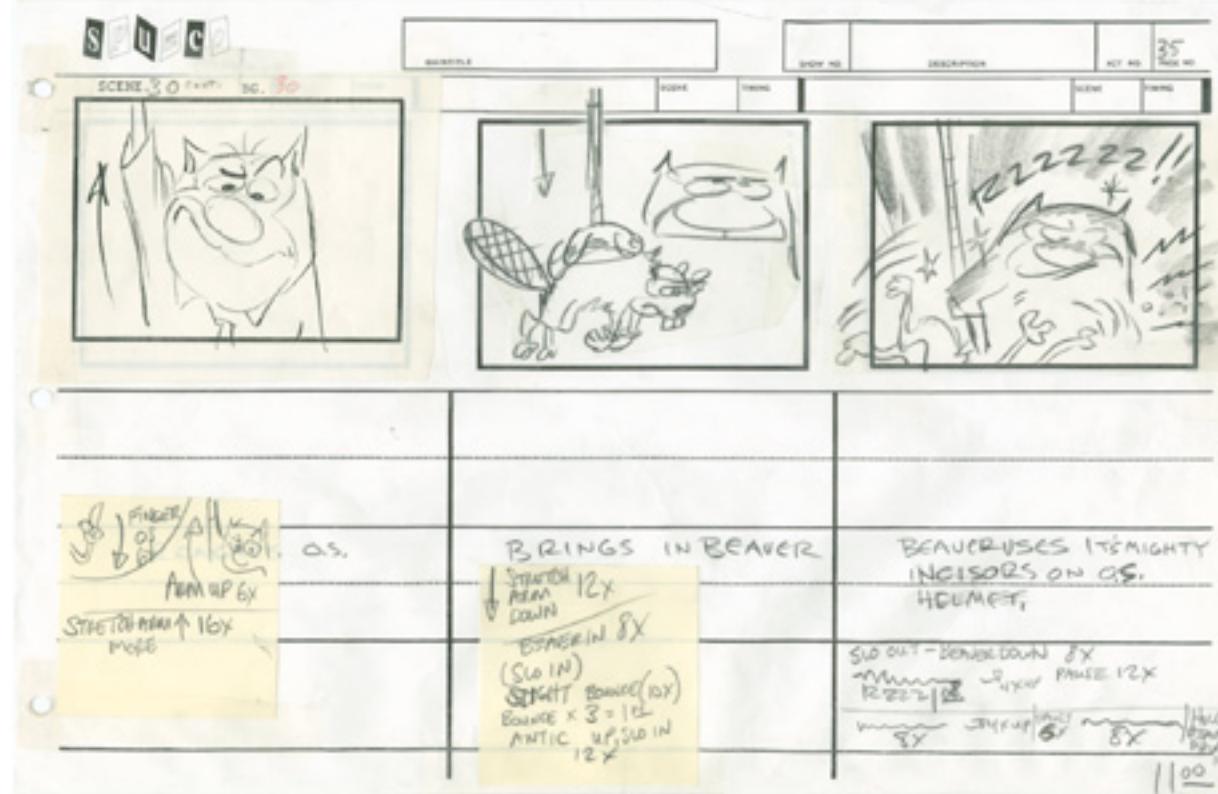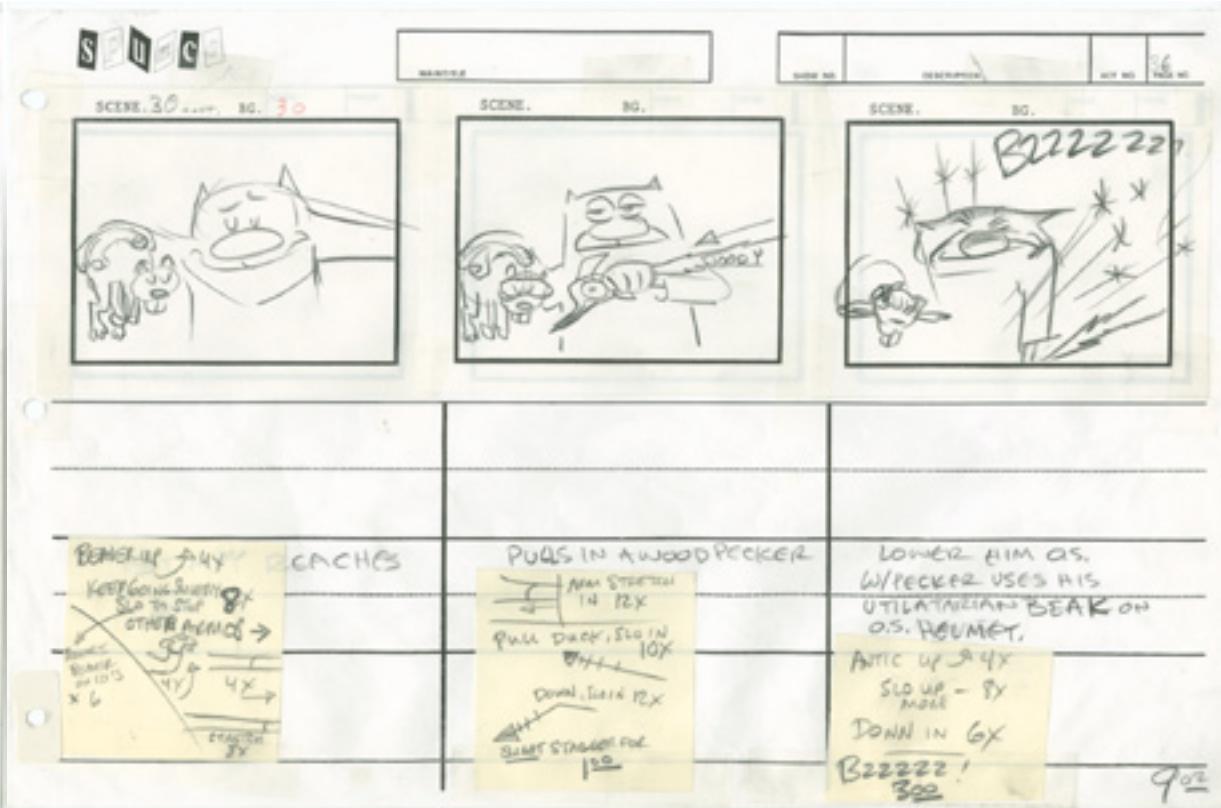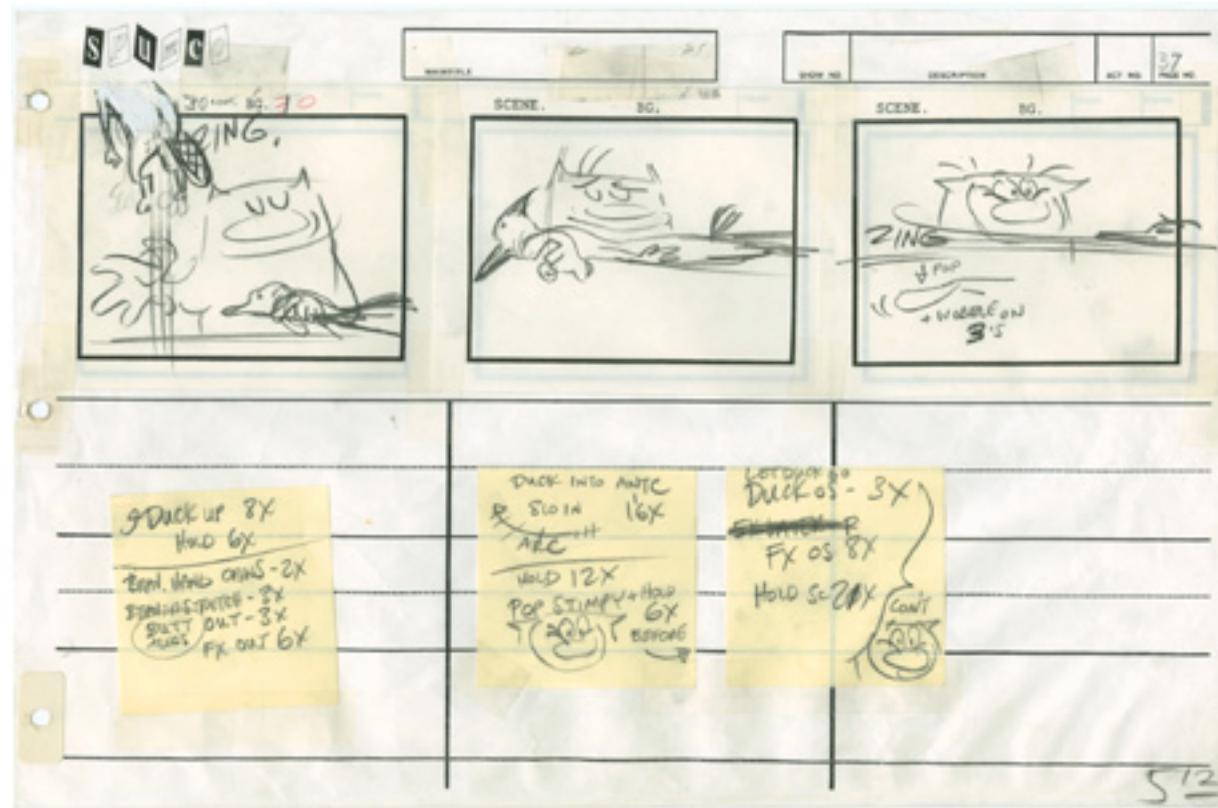
Bob Camp's brilliant storyboards
for "Stimpy's Invention", 1992.
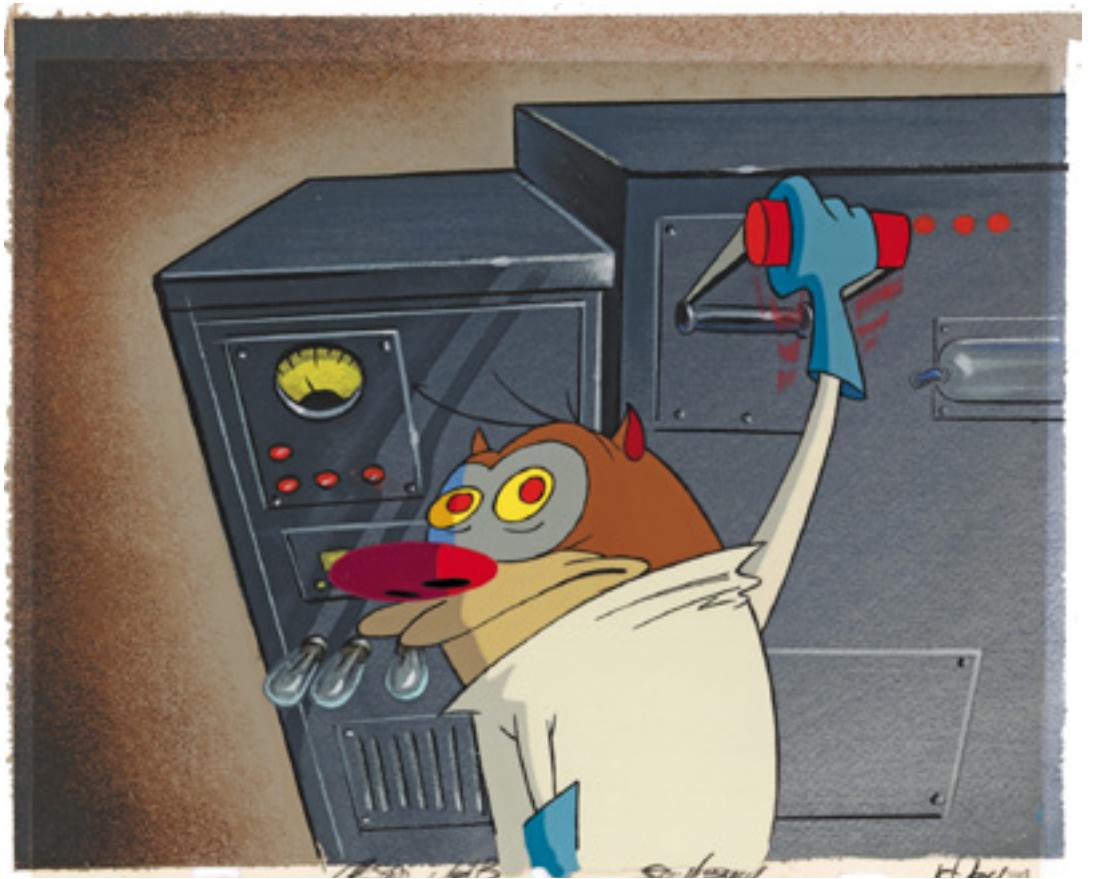
Production art from
"Stimpy's Invention", 1992.
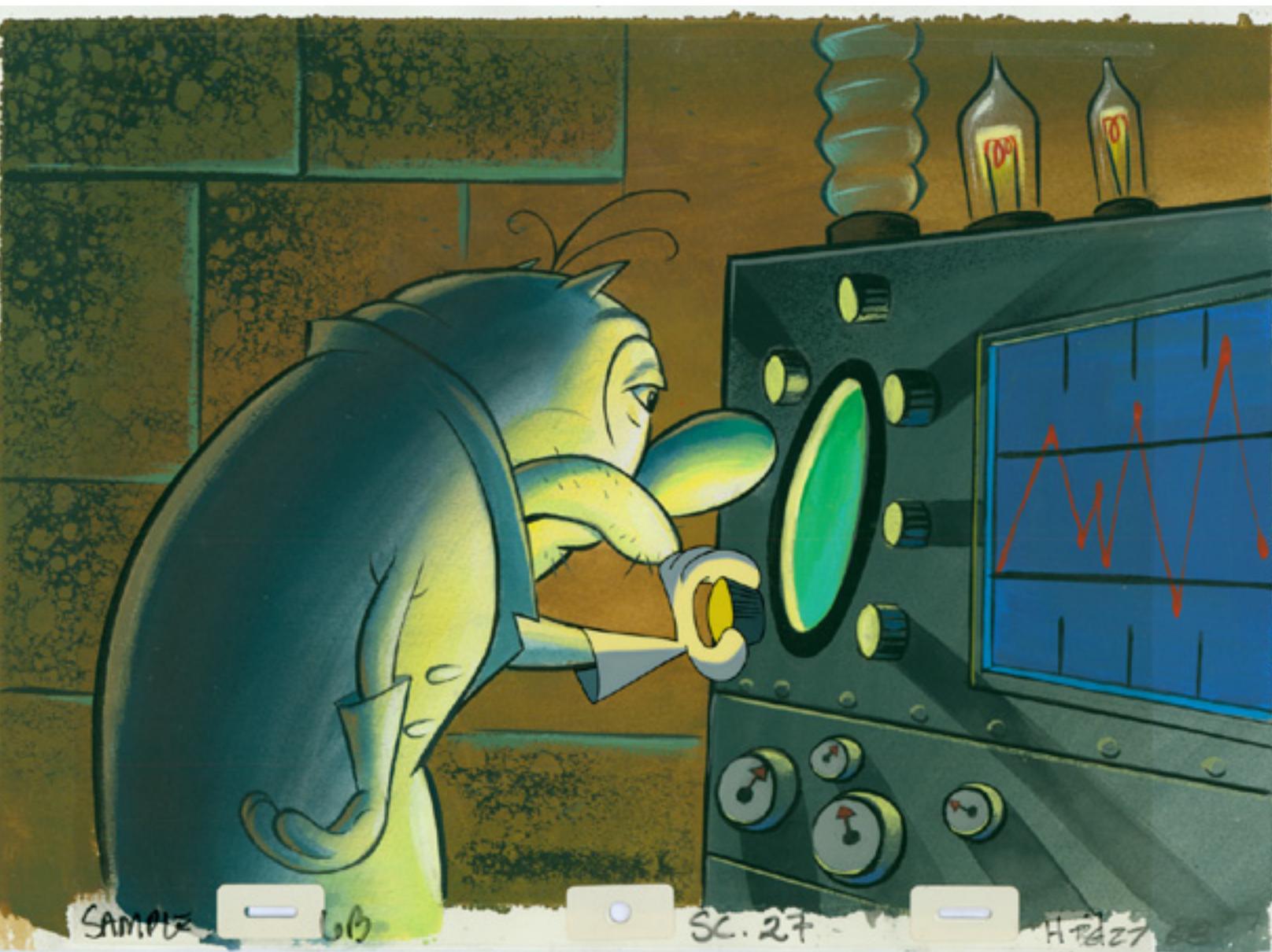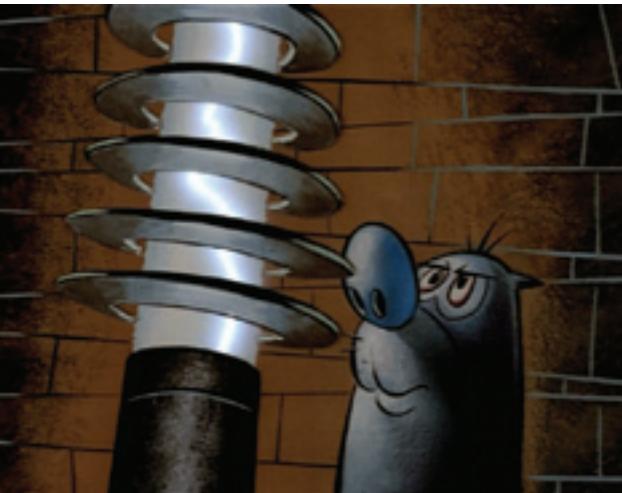
## Make a New Story Over the Weekend

Despite my explanation to Vanessa that killing the episode "Stimpy's Invention" would cost time and money she couldn't make the connection. She assumed we could whip up another story and storyboard for free over the weekend, and I tried like hell to explain that we couldn't. I said, "Look, if you really want us to make a new cartoon from scratch, here's how late it's gonna be and how much we'll have to charge you to redo it." Apparently that response was unacceptable. Everyone at Nickelodeon seemed outraged that they couldn't get a free cartoon from us—and in a weekend. This was an extreme emergency at Spümcø, and I asked Vanessa to come out to Los Angeles and let me personally pitch the cartoon to her to show her it was funny, not scary. Her cohorts at Nick tried to talk her out of it. There was one woman who really seemed to have it in for us, just on principle. She told Vanessa, "Don't you listen to that man! Every time you do, he talks you into doing whatever he wants. You're the boss. Put your foot down!"

Luckily, Vanessa ignored the advice and came out to see me, although the mean lady came with her. I managed to get Vanessa in a room alone without Ms. Evilbritches and acted out the whole storyboard.
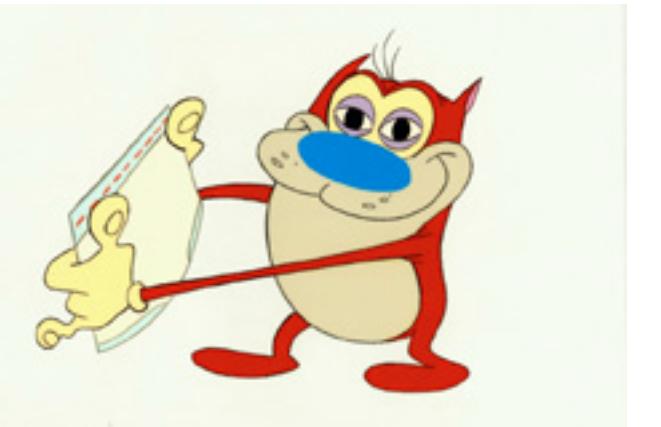
I basically begged Vanessa to let us do the episode. When she protested about some of the "scary drawings of Ren," I suggested we go through the board and scratch out the scariest ones. So we spent a few minutes haggling over all these great Bob Camp drawings. It pained me to lose some of them, while I argued for others, and we were able to meet halfway—and incidentally save the cartoon.

At this point Nickelodeon had delayed for so long in giving us the go-ahead that the show would be late regardless. I went ahead and finished the layouts, timed the new layouts that replaced the cut scenes, and shipped them off to Bob Jaques at Carbunkle where the artists outdid themselves in animating it.

It seems everyone who worked on the episode outdid themselves: Henry Porch who picked music, Bill Griggs who edited the music, Billy West with his frenetic performance as the announcer, and our in-house special effects cameraman/scene planner David Koenigsberg, who did all these great visual effects for the Frankenstein-ish laboratory scenes. "Stimpy's Invention" was one of those episodes where everything came together, despite the furious resistance of the network.

Bob Jaques' tighty whiteys, 1992.
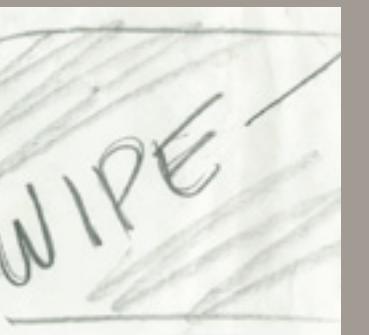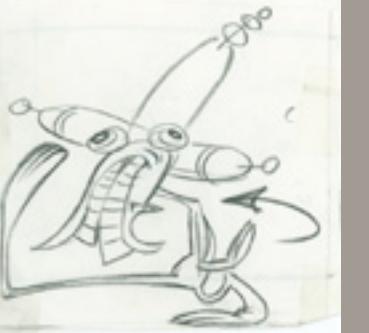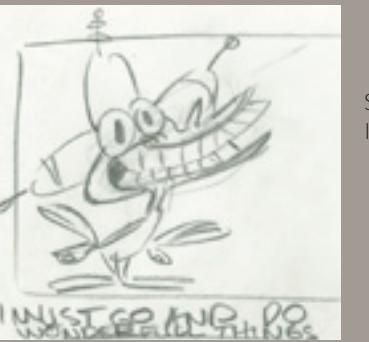
Some of Bob Camp's "Stimpy's Invention" storyboards, 1992.

Happy Happy Joy Joy

The last thing we did for "Stimpy's Invention" was the musical finale, "The Happy Happy Joy Joy Song." I struggled for a month trying to come up with lyrics and a tune. I wanted it to be a takeoff of Burl Ives's kids' songs and movie appearances. Finally, one night I was at Chris Reccardi's house and he played me a chord progression on his guitar that was fun and upbeat, and

I started singing "Happy Happy Joy Joy" over and over again. I couldn't make any of my lyrics fit the music so I decided to make the title the whole song, and to speak the Burl Ives "lyrics" in between the musical chorus. Chris and I recorded it the next day. I dubbed my own voice in four or five-part harmony for the chorus and Chris played the guitar.

Then I had to do the layouts and time everything to the music. This sequence was too late to send to Carbunkle so we animated it at Spümcø. Julian Chaney, Mark Kausler, and probably a couple of other people along with myself animated it, and then I shipped it off to the Philippines where they were doing the assistant animation and cel painting. Bob Jaques went

there himself to supervise it because he and I were so frustrated by the studio not following the timing and animation closely enough. This was right after the volcano exploded and the whole island—including the animation studio—was covered in soot. That's why the film of "Stimpy's Invention" and some other first season episodes look so dirty.
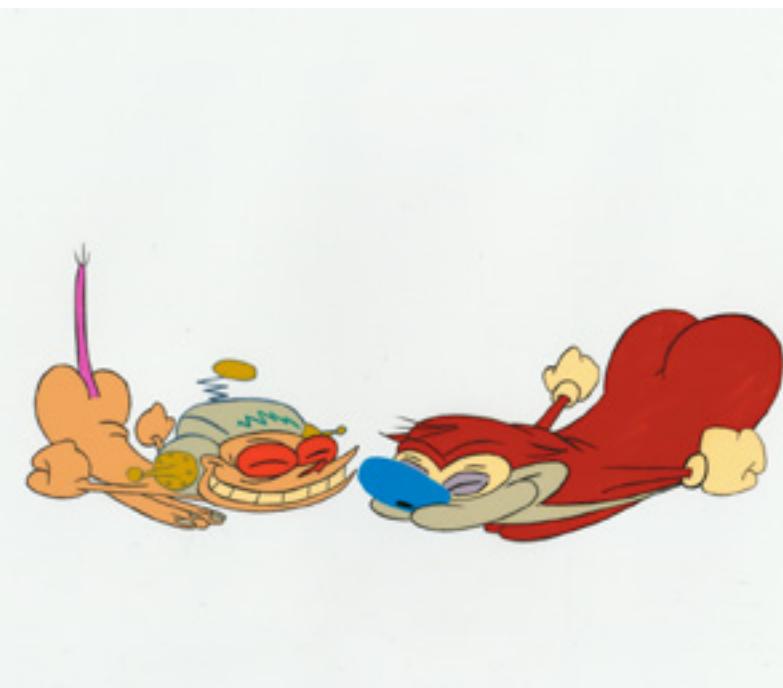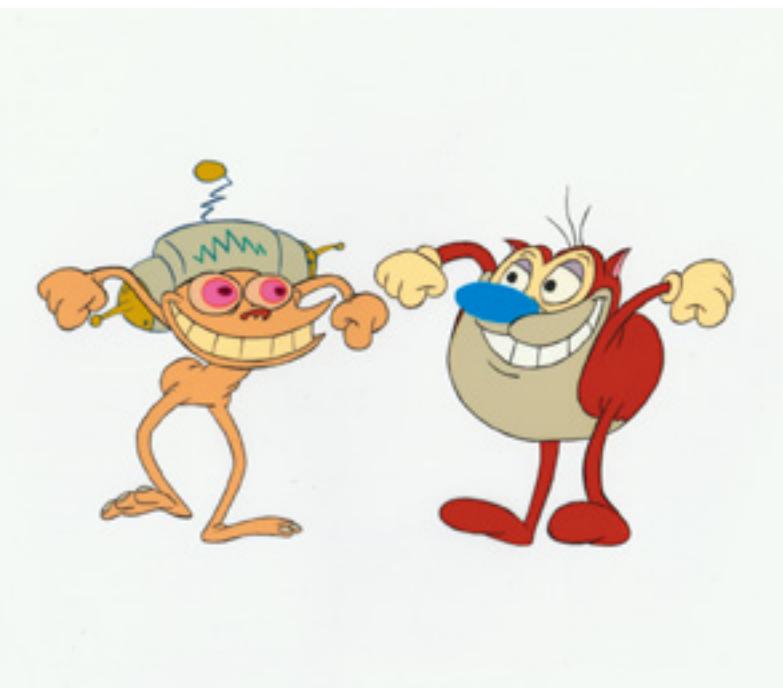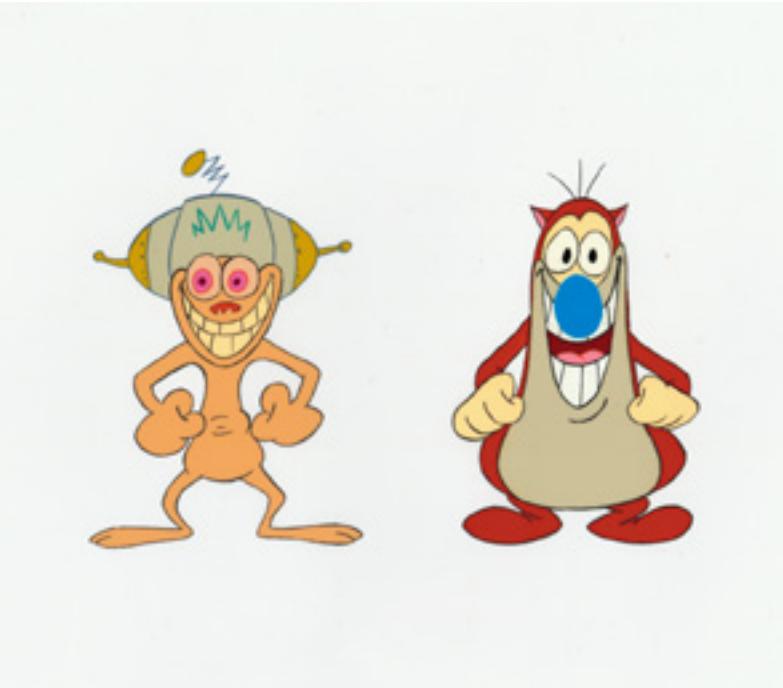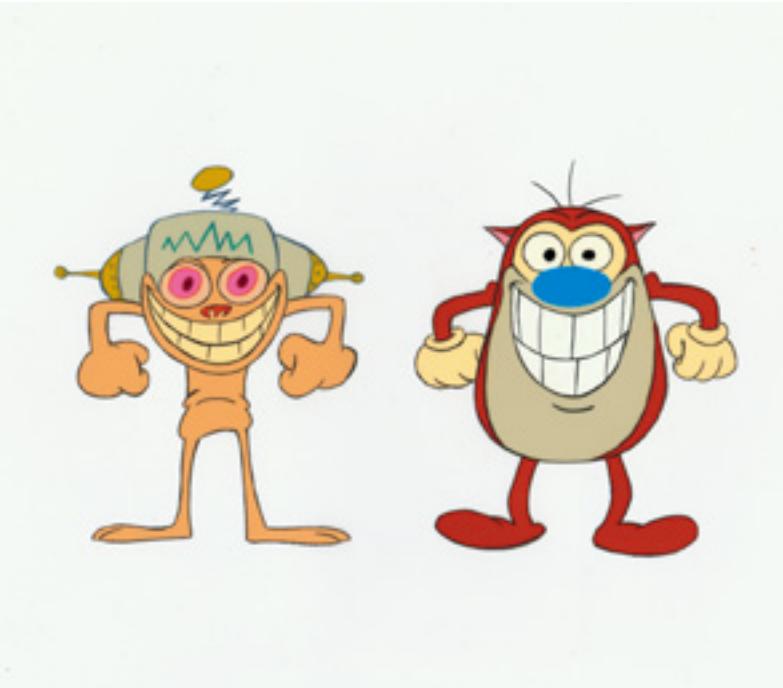
Jim Smith and Space Madness

One of the key figures in the production of *The Ren & Stimpy* series was Jim Smith, who was a partner in Spümcø and had worked with me since The Rolling Stones video "Harlem Shuffle." Jim is the perfect Spümcø artist in that he doesn't actually have the "Spümcø style;" he has his own style. When I first saw his drawings, I was floored, the same way I was when I discovered Frank Frazetta's paintings and Bob Clampett's cartoons.

Background designs by Jim Smith, 1991.

While his influences are easy to spot, he has a distinctive way of seeing the world and interpreting it into his own kinds of shapes and lines. He also has a unique sense of humor and has contributed many stories and gags to our cartoons.

Jim excels at drawing power, solidity, and manliness. He's the only person I've ever seen who can make fun of seriousness in a drawing, and is my go-to cartoonist for solutions to difficult-to-draw scenes.

Unlike most cartoonists, he can draw backgrounds as well as characters, which makes him great at storyboards, layout, and art direction. He did all of that on the pilot episode "Big House Blues," and even voiced the narrator with the southern drawl. He sounds a lot like Rex Allen, who narrated the Disney live-action TV movies. We all grew up watching them so it was a funny idea to have Jim narrate the adventure of Ren and Stimpy in that style. It gave the audience a sense of comfort, like your friendly uncle was telling you a loveable tall tale.

Jim Smith drew lots of storyboards and layouts for *Ren & Stimpy*, and his scenes are recognizable for how well balanced and composed they are. He did some magnificent shots in the fairy tale episode "Robin Hoek," in which I asked him to lay out scenes in the style of N.C. Wyeth's illustrations for children's books.

Jim's drawings of solid and glorious trees gave that cartoon a handsome dignity, while Bob Camp and I filled it with disgusting jokes. Bill Wray's paintings of Jim's layouts were a perfect combination of classic children's book illustration.

The final color study by Bill Wray, 1991.
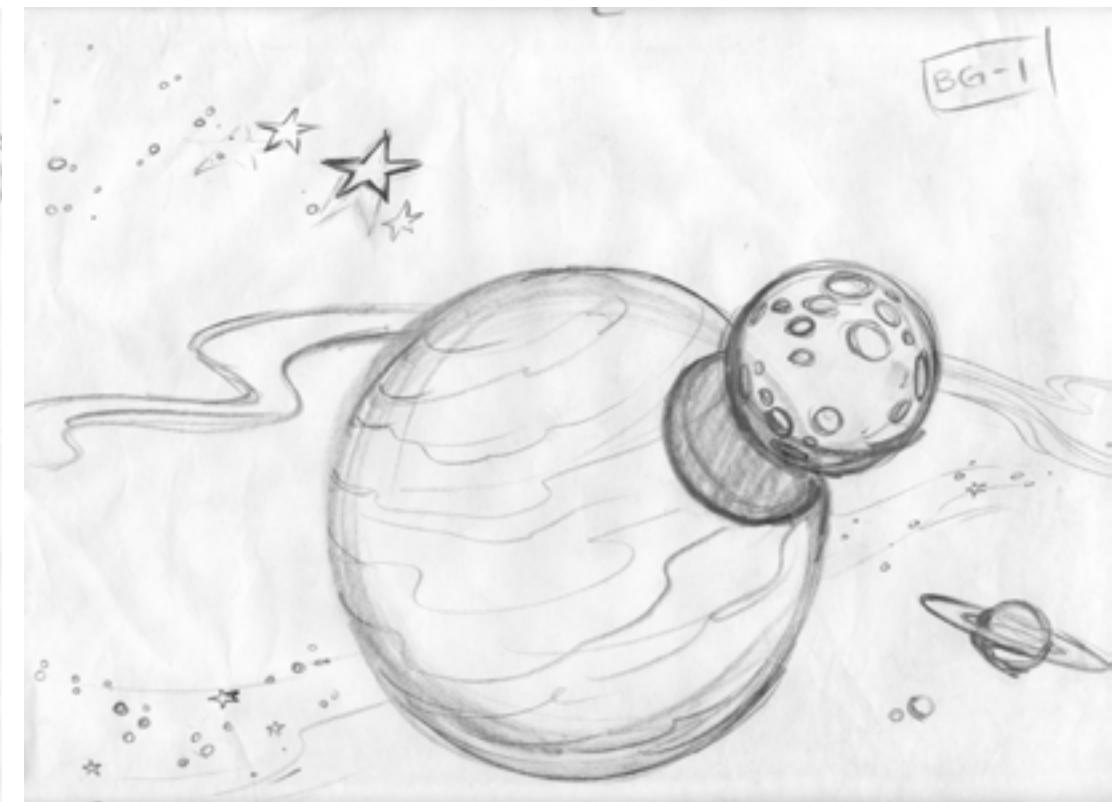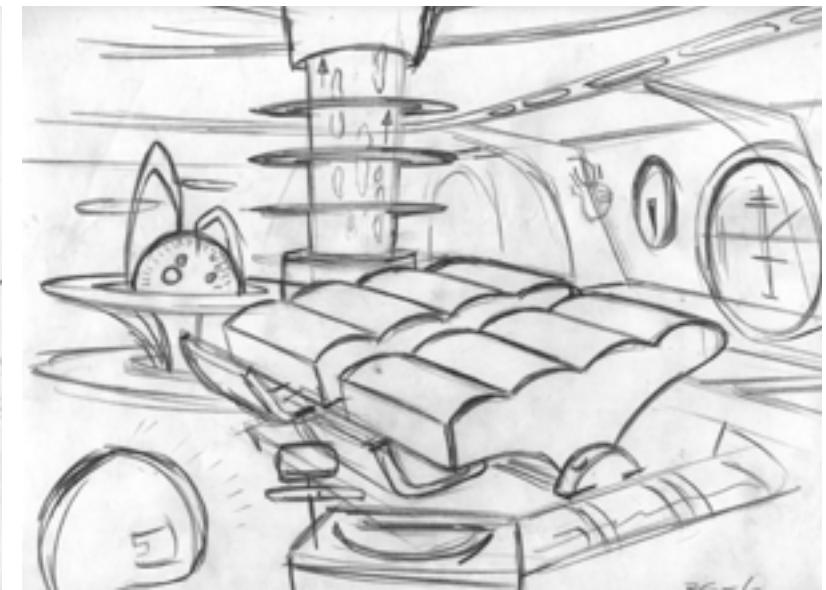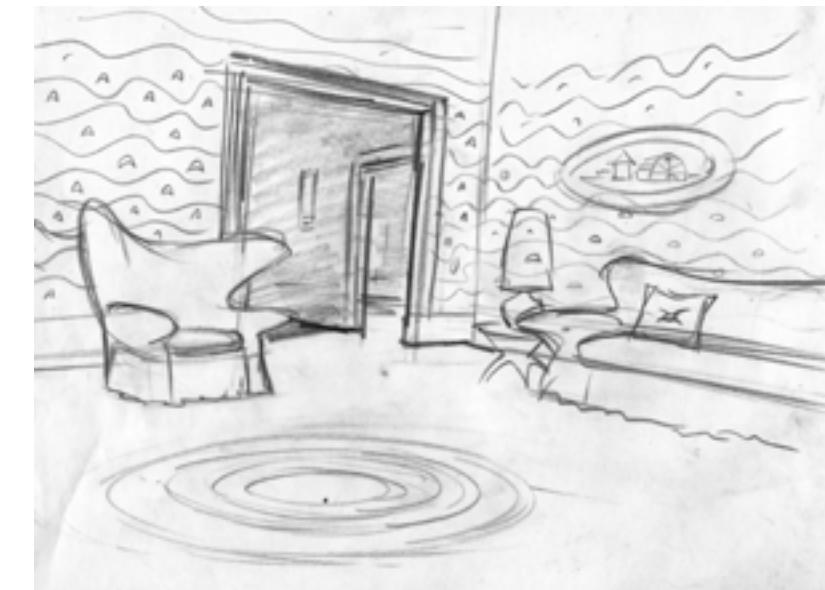
Production art by Jim Smith for "Space Madness", 1991.
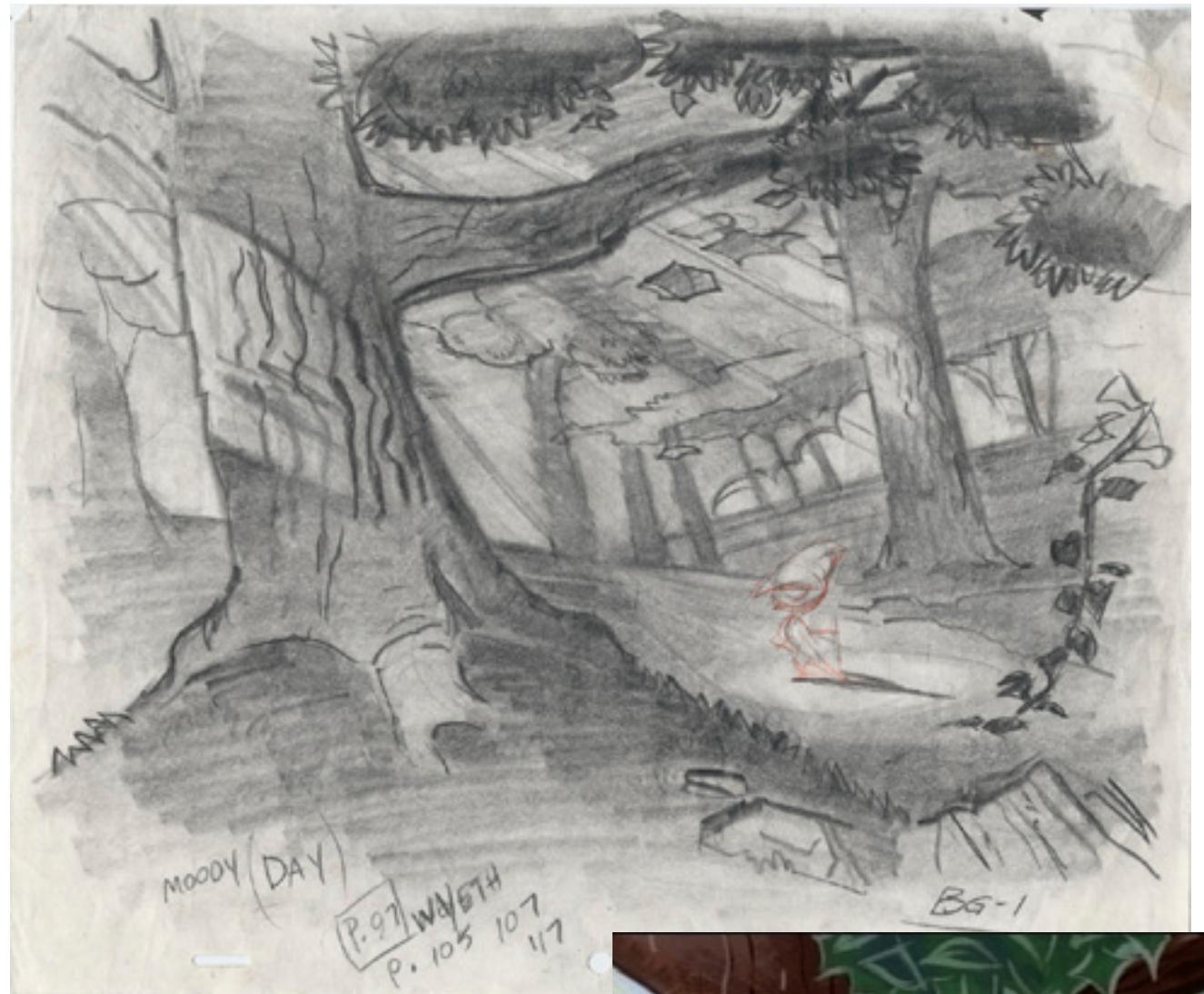
Jim Smith's layout drawing with Bill Wray's final color painting below. From "Robin Hoek", 1991.

Space Episodes

Jim Smith and I both love science fiction—the old-fashioned kind from pulp magazines of the 1930s and *Buck Rogers/Flash Gordon* comics and movie serials. We had lunch one day and started knocking around some ideas for space stories. We came up with three: "Space Madness," "Marooned," and "The Black Hole."

"Space Madness" was a clichéd tale of astronauts going on a long trip between stars. In these stories someone always goes mad—and that was perfect for Ren. We wanted to bring back this old-fashioned type of science fiction as an antidote to the modern *Star Wars* style, which I call "Happy Days in Space." We wanted bulky, streamlined powerhouse spaceships whose sheer aggressive futuristic designs could rip the Heavens apart. We had tons of old magazines filled with bulky, fantastic designs of factory technology, and used those as reference. There was a time in American history when everyone was obsessed with progress and the future—especially the industrial designers like Raymond Loewy and Buckminster Fuller. We adapted Thirties radios, vacuum cleaners, toasters and all kinds of everyday objects into computers, hyperdrive machines, and obscure equipment on the ship. Well, I should say Jim did. He could take the funniest ideas and make them look dead serious, which made them even funnier.

Jim Gomez and I wrote up an outline for "Space Madness" that detailed more of the plot and some of the gags. From there we added a lot of gags in the storyboard, like the flipping of the towel, Ren cupping his hands and squirting the bath water through it, and the famous bath fart.

Since Mitchell Kriegman made us explain to the audience how Ren and Stimpy obtain a rocket, we came up with an opening to the cartoon where the "real" Ren and Stimpy are watching their favorite sci-fi TV show —"Commander Hoek and Stimpy."
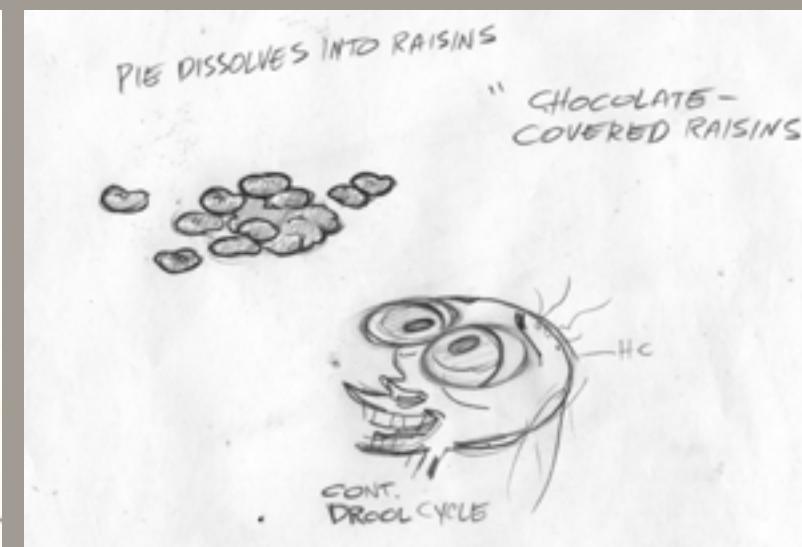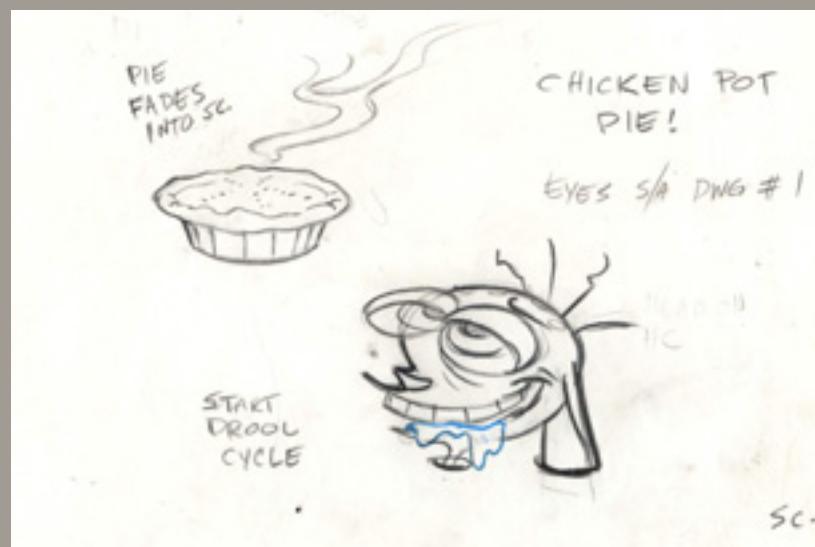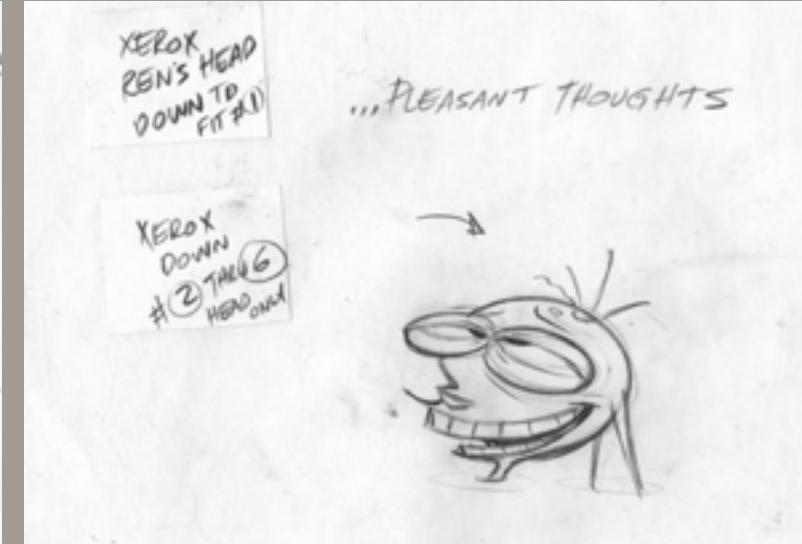
Bob Camp Opening Layouts

Bob did some really lively and funny layouts for the opening of the episode, which are pictured here, and Tim Borquez and the sound effects team dug into their mid-century sci-fi sound effects libraries. We used theremins, rocket thrusters, raygun sound effects and ancient sounding engines to give the cartoon a dynamic vintage feeling.
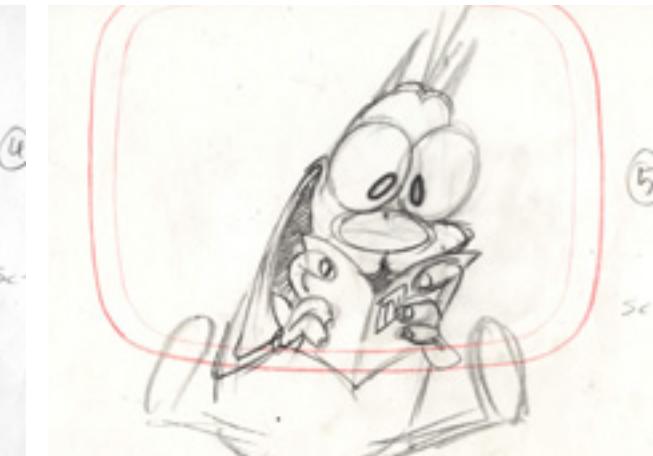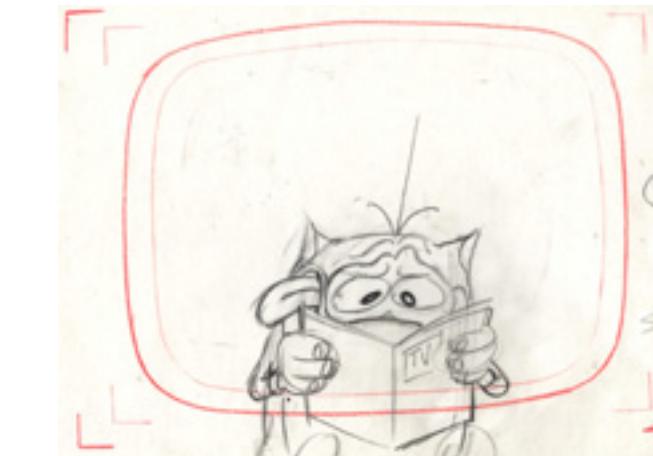
"Space Madness" came out better than we hoped for; it was the first cartoon we did where I felt everything really worked. Many of us contributed to it, but it's a film that was tailored to, and shone because of, Jim Smith's abilities.

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√7.  p. 66 Ren can't bond with his popsicle over things they hate.
about women (perfume, lacy things) Too misogynistic or homoerotic.
Take your pick.
√8.  P. 61 Don't understand the first drawing of Ren. Clarify.
√9.  P. 86 Middle shot doesn't look like Ren.
√10. p. 56 If you label the lever "Bath Gravity" everything will
make sense. Think about it.
√11. p.78 Want to see more cartoon squash and squish action like in
the pilot when Stimpy jumps on Ren.
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space madness
we'd like to go to outline on this one, but we don't get the turkey leg joke. And we'd like to drop the history eraser button. So we'll need a new ending.
Call when ready. Talk to you soon.

2   12/6/90

Credits Upfront

Before *Ren & Stimpy*, the only creative person on a TV cartoon that would get a credit in the opening title cards was the writer—the person who guaranteed the cartoon would be lousy. When we started *Ren & Stimpy*, I wanted to restore the 1940s tradition of crediting all the main creative people before the cartoon starts, instead of on a scroll that races by at the end amongst hundreds of other artists, production people, and gofers.

I asked Vanessa if I could credit the story person, the storyboard artist, the director, and the background painter. She compromised and let me give credit to the story person, the director, and the storyboard artists—and the network even put it in writing, never to be varied from.

Some episodes turned out so well that I tried to have exceptions made for certain artists who had a lot to do with the quality of the cartoon. I got Bob Jaques's name on "Space Madness" for his fantastic animation direction, Bill Wray's name on a couple cartoons for his outstanding painting, and here and there, various creative people who I thought did exceptional jobs. This was a fight with the network every time, and I don't think the artists realized this. Everyone took it for granted that they should get credit upfront (even though they never had before on any other production), and I agreed that they should. But each time I went to bat for them, I lost some points in the eyes of the network.

The director's credit became a coveted prize. When *The Ren & Stimpy Show* broke out, all the magazines wanted to do stories. They saw my director credit and called for interviews. I would ask them to also interview some of the other artists, and many of those artists ended up well known by the fans. This was a new thing for our business. Cartoonists before were anonymous—people knew the cartoon characters but not the creators.

Now all of a sudden, we were becoming mini-rock stars. Whole magazines would dedicate themselves to *Ren & Stimpy* and the show's artists, and, of course, we all loved it. It also went to some people's heads. A few of the artists (and even non-artists!) began to crave my director's position and the supposed glory that came with it, which led to problems that I didn't foresee during the second season.

Summer Break

After the first season finished, I asked Vanessa if she could find the money for me to keep on my main creative staff during the hiatus between seasons. This was unheard of and she asked why. The primary reason, I explained, was that if I don't keep everyone on, some of them will get jobs at other studios and we won't be able to get them back. It's a problem I have had throughout my career. I hire people, train them to work in my style and with my production system, and then at the end of the season they get snapped up by other studios, and I have to start all over again. The other objective was to upgrade everybody's skills. I convinced Vanessa that it would be a good idea to create an advanced training program for the artists. We spent two months studying classic cartoons, doing exercises in storyboarding, writing, and layout.

Over this period I had Bill Wray, our main background painter, experiment with new brush textures and color combinations so he'd have an extra set of tools to create with. The training period paid off. The second season of *Ren & Stimpy* looked much better than the first, and each episode advanced in skill and technique—and therefore, creativity.

At the time, this was very exciting because it was like a return to the rapid advances in animation that happened during the 1930s. The whole studio knew they were not only expected to meet a preset standard of quality, but that I expected everyone to top themselves in every cartoon. It was stressful, but rewarding. We imagined that in another couple of years we would be doing stuff that we couldn't even predict.

During this training period, Gerry Laybourne arranged a huge dinner for my main crew to sup with the Nickelodeon execs in New York. It was at one of those super fancy Manhattan restaurants where they use huge plates to serve you tiny morsels of food covered in some kind of alien, stinky sauce. Executives love this kind of food.

It was a very happy meeting. Gerry gave a big speech thanking us for the wonderful work we did on *Ren & Stimpy*. She and Vanessa were true fans of the show; they weren't just happy that it was a big success, they were really proud of how different and fun it was. The other execs at the table were happy with the success, but I don't know how much they understood about what we were doing.

Can We Do George Liquor Now?

I took the first opportunity I had to ask a favor of Gerry and Vanessa. First, I asked if they were happy with all the episodes. They were. "Even 'Space Madness' and 'Stimpy's Invention'?" I asked. "Oh yes, especially those." Then I asked the big question. "Will you trust me now when I bring you a story that you don't quite get in the beginning, and allow me to produce it anyway?" I reminded them about how much they didn't like "Space Madness" and "Stimpy's Invention" in the beginning. They didn't seem to remember that, but agreed to give us less notes on the second season and generally go easier on us. Then I asked if it was OK for me to make a couple cartoons with my character George Liquor. Again they agreed.

Twenty Episodes Fast

Vanessa came to the Spümcø studio a couple weeks after the end of season one to give me what she thought was happy news. Not only had Nickleodeon approved a second season, but they wanted to jump from six episodes to twenty a season. Twenty episodes in one year! I was shocked and said so. It was barely possible to get six out in the first season; how could we make twenty in the same amount of time? Vanessa said, "Just hire more artists." Well, I knew that wouldn't solve the problem; it would actually create more problems. It would mean having to train twice as many people—and this time, people I had never worked with before and who were used to making cartoons in the Saturday morning assembly line way. They wouldn't be able to instantly switch over to this creatively demanding approach.

I tried my hardest to convince Vanessa to do thirteen instead of twenty, knowing even that would be a monstrous challenge. I beseeched her to think realistically about it—on a practical level. But the order had come from above her and there was no saying no. Twenty it was going to be. I told her then that it would be more important than ever to cut down on the notes and masses of revisions we had to deal with during the first season, and she promised to take it much easier on us.

Stills from
"Ren Hoek", 1991.

More Execs, More Changes

Even though Vanessa agreed to fewer notes for the second season, once we began in 1992, we got notes (a prime example is on the next page!) not just from Vanessa and Will McRobb, but also from a horde of faceless newcomers who knew nothing about cartoons, let alone, this cartoon.

"ALL GEORGE LIQUOR APPEARANCES MUST BE EXPUNGED FROM FUTURE SHOWS. THAT MEANS YOU NEED A NEW CHARACTER TO PLAY THE [BLOODY HEAD] FAIRY."
HAUNTED HOUSE   April 17, 1992.

"CAN'T SAY 'AN AMERICAN FAIRY.' FAIRY IS THE PROBLEM.
HAUNTED HOUSE   March 3, 1992.

"EVEN THOUGH THE GHOST IS ALREADY DEAD, YOU STILL CAN'T HAVE HIM KILL HIMSELF"
HAUNTED HOUSE   December 18, 1991.

"STIMPY CAN SHINE HIS ASS WITH THE GHOST, BUT THIS SHOT OF HIM PULLING IT THROUGH HIS LEGS CAN'T BE APPROVED."
HAUNTED HOUSE   April 17, 1992.

"WE'D LIKE TO SEE A CHARACTER DESIGN FOR THE FAT MAN. HE LOOKS A LITTLE TOO NEGROID AT THE MOMENT."
HAUNTED HOUSE   April 17, 1992.

"LOSE THIS 'TIME-KILLING' JOKE. IT CUTS A LITTLE TOO CLOSE FOR OUR COMFORT."
HAUNTED HOUSE   April 17, 1992.

"CONSIDER IT REJECTED. WE DECIDED THAT ONE 'NURSE STIMPY' WAS ENOUGH. I KNOW THE PUBLIC LOVES THAT EPISODE, BUT WE NICKELODEON TYPES COULDN'T GET TOO ENTHUSIASTIC OVER ELEVEN MINUTES OF SICKNESS JOKES."
REN THE JUNGLE DOCTOR [Scrapped.]   December 27, 1991.

"MAYBE YOU THOUGHT WE HAD A SENSE OF HUMOR ABOUT OURSELVES....WE DON'T. ALL THE JOKES THAT COME AT THE EXPENSE OF THE PRODUCER HAVE TO GO. IS THERE ANY OTHER JOB FOR REN THAT WOULDN'T IMPUGN NICKELODEON EXECUTIVES?"
STIMPY'S CARTOON SHOW   December 27, 1991.

"THINGS YOU CAN'T SAY OR SHOW ON NICKELODEON: BREAST MILK, NIPPLES ON BEER BOTTLES"
BIG BABY SCAM   January 7, 1991.

"GERRY LAYBOURNE IS STRONGLY AGAINST MIXING LIVE ACTION AND ANIMATION"   January 7, 1992

"A RUBBER GLOVE COVERED IN SALVE SAYS 'INSERTION' TO US."
TO SALVE AND TO SALVE NOT   February 6, 1992.

"NEW POLICY. NO CIGARETTES OR PIPES.
FAKE DAD   April 9, 1992.

"THE DECISION MAKERS HERE HAVE DECLARED AN ALL OUT BAN ON ANY MOMENTS WHERE REN IS THREATENING KOWALSKI WITH PHYSICAL VIOLENCE."

The Background Department

Bill Wray discovered a young illustrator named Scott Wills who had marvelous technique. Scott's own illustrations were super-slick and clean—in a different style than necessary for animated cartoons, but Bill was optimistic that Scott was skilled enough to adapt quickly, which he was. Scott was a great addition to the background department, and he and Bill pushed themselves to new heights. They painted different episodes in totally different styles, and I was constantly bringing them new sources of inspiration—Golden Books, live-action musicals, old magazine illustrations, film noir movies—anything to add variety and thrills

to the show. We used colors and moods to help tell the stories, backgrounds were no longer just scenery to fill in the space behind characters.

At the same time, Bill and I discovered another great painter—Glenn Barr. We both bought an issue of *Film Threat* that had a cover illustration by Glenn and rushed to show each other. Bill hired him. Our background department improved in leaps and bounds and set a style and standard that influenced and changed the way TV cartoons (and even some features) would be painted for the next couple of decades.

Below and top four, across: "Son of Stimpy," 1993.

Bottom left: "A Visit to Anthony", 1993.

Bottom right: "Rubber Nipple Salesman", 1992.

179
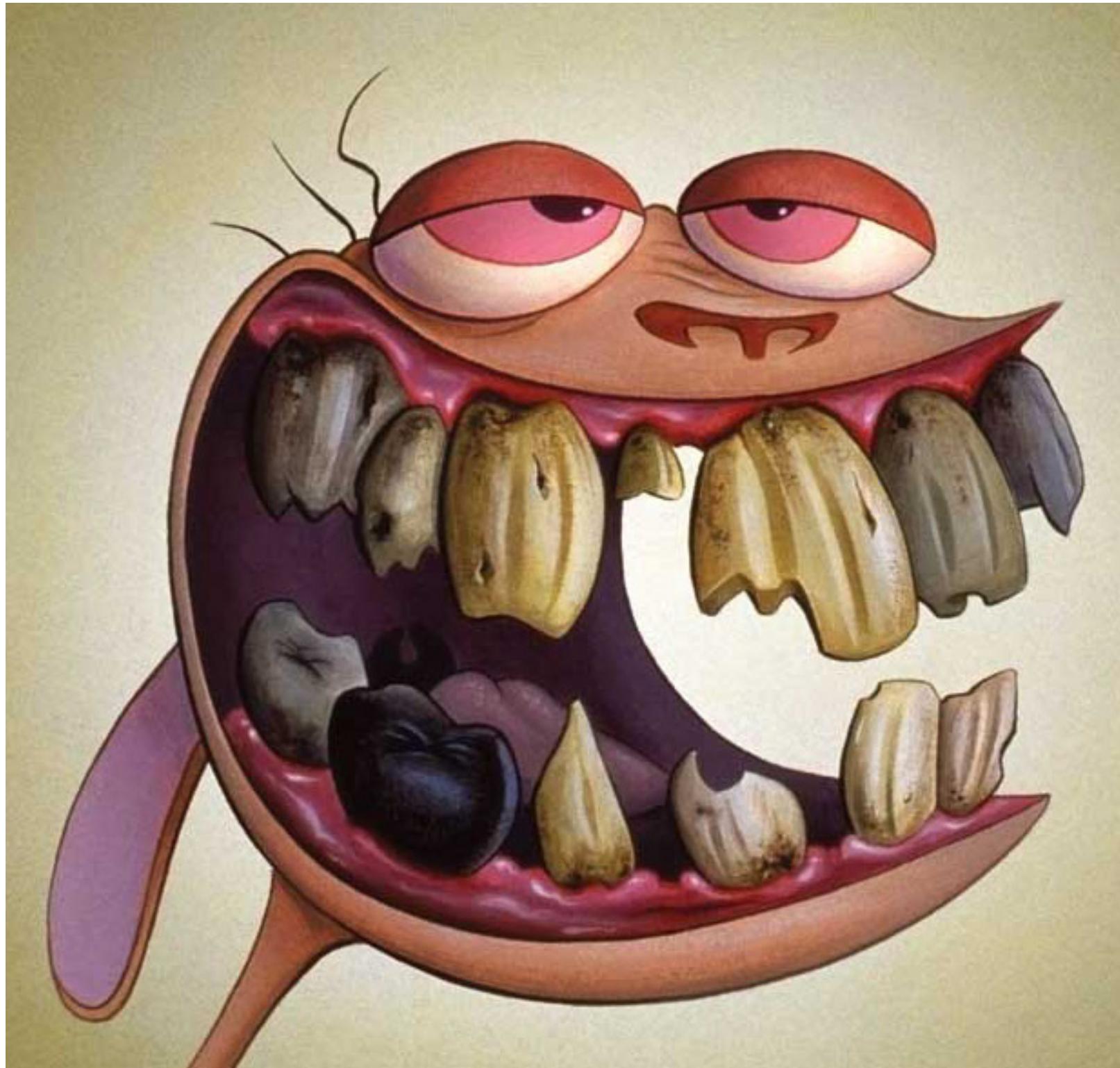
Vincent Waller's gross-out
painting from "Ren's Toothache",
1992

Another Waller gross-out
masterpiece, 1992.

181
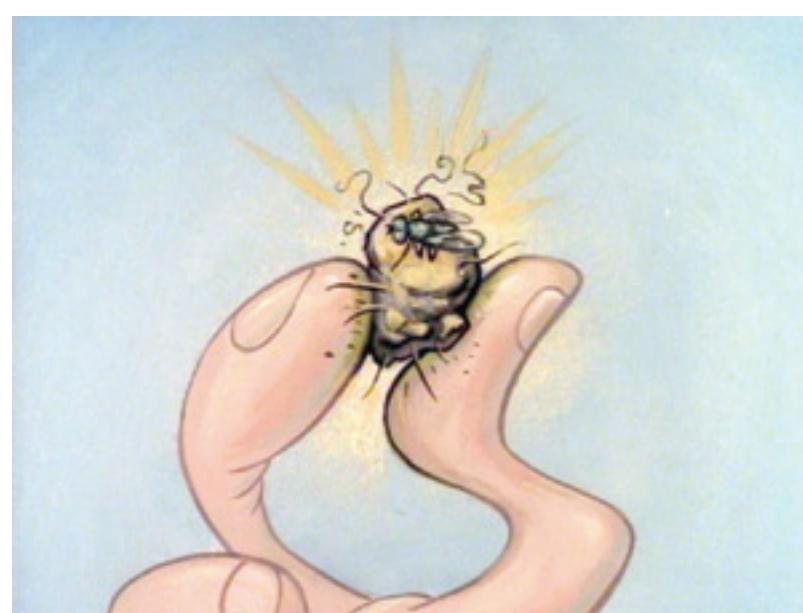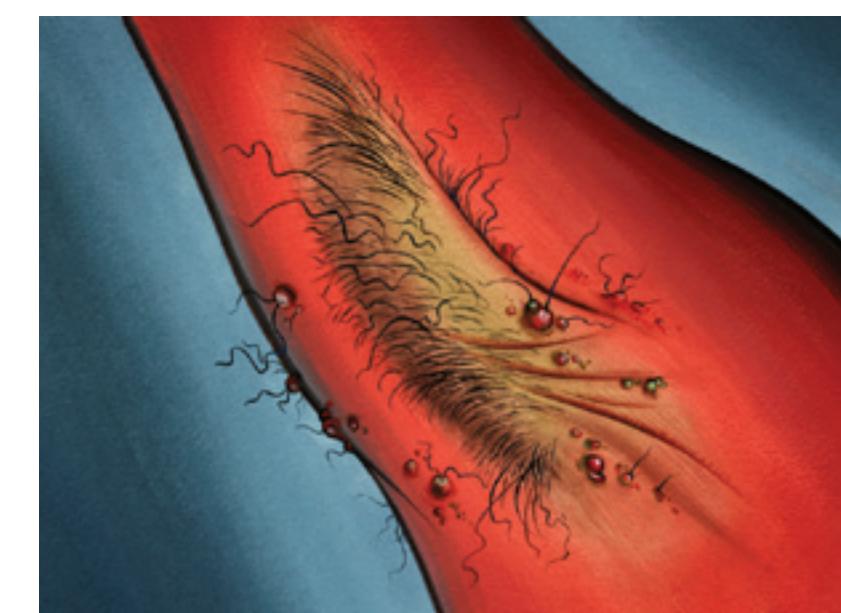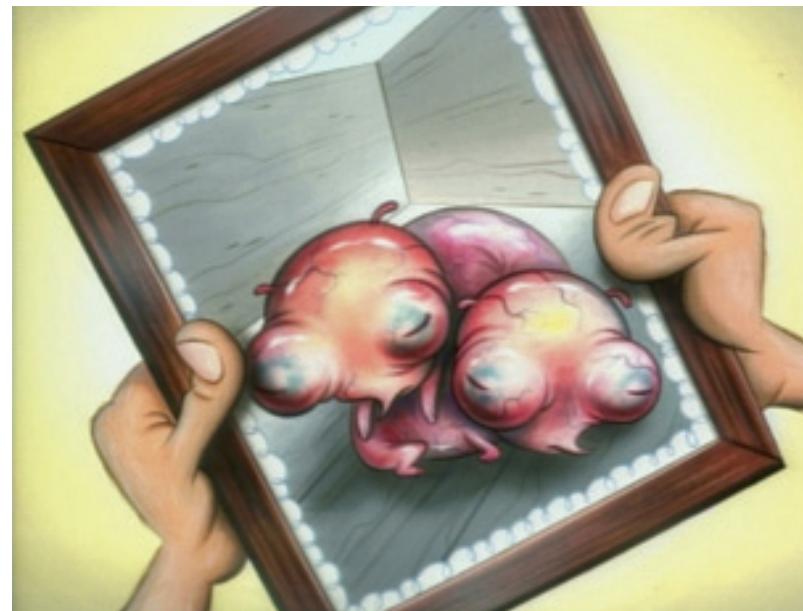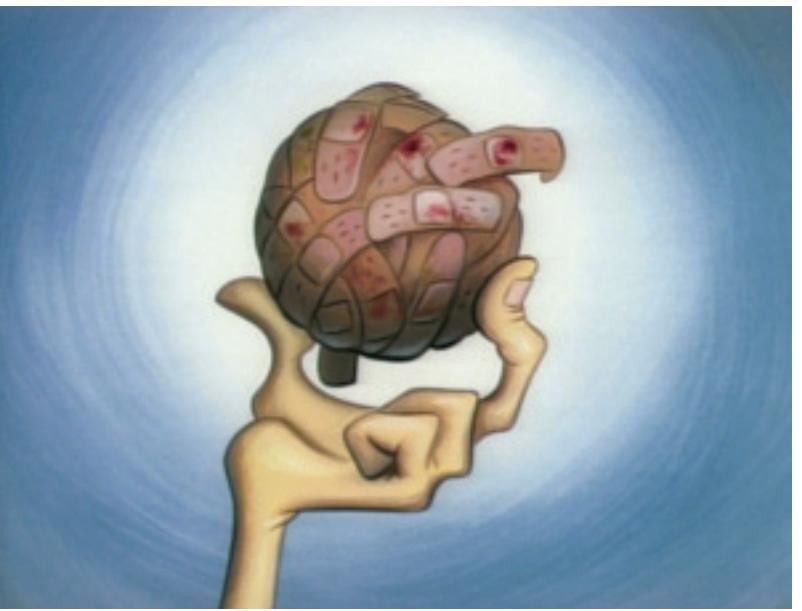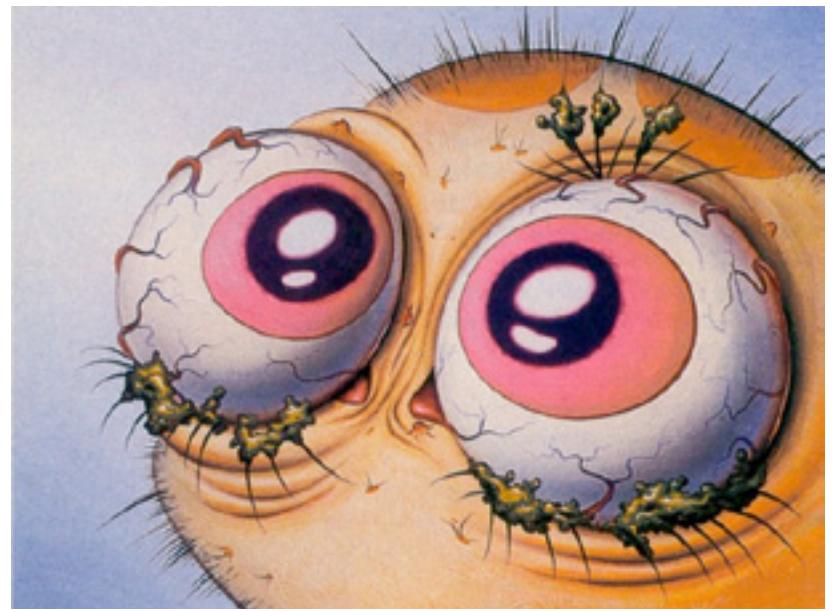
Canine inspection
"Dog Show", 1992.

Save me!
"Fire Dogs", 1991.

Svën's Band-Aid collection
"Svën Høek", 1992.

The hands of a working man
"A Visit to Anthony", 1993.

Stimpy's first personal possession
"Ren's Toothache", 1992.

Stimpy's filthy ear
"Haunted House", 1992.

Ren and Sven's whelping box
"Svën Høek", 1992.

Stimpy's grain of litter
"Fire Dogs", 1991.

When we did the fake commercials in *Ren & Stimpy*, the artists and I attempted to go with a real 1950s retro look to contrast with the design of Ren & Stimpy in the story cartoons.

These 'commercials' weren't meant to be stories or personality explorations. They were bookends to the stories.

The first LOG 'commercial' designed by Bob Camp.
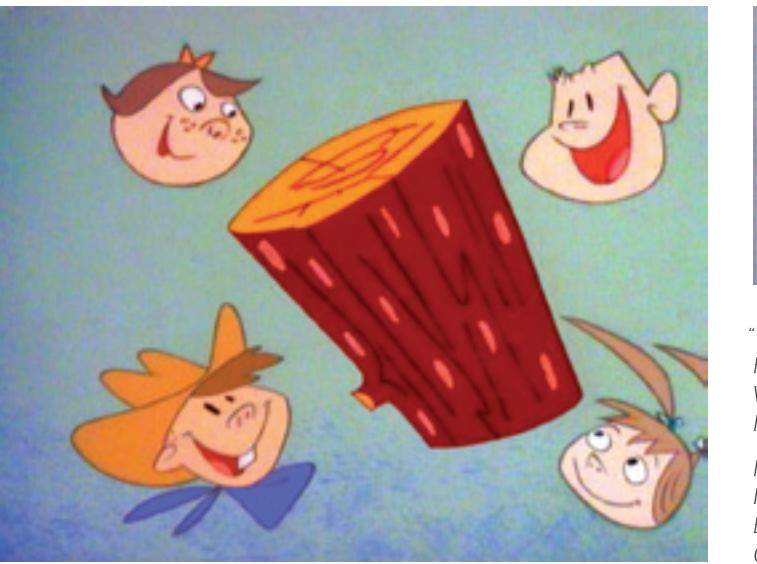
"What rolls down stairs alone or in pairs
Rolls over your neighbor's dog?
What's great for a snack and fits on your back?
It's Log, Log, Log!

It's Log, Log, it's big, it's heavy, it's wood.
It's Log, Log, it's better than bad, it's good!
Everyone wants a log! You're gonna love it, Log!
Come on and get your log! Everyone needs a Log!"

I'd met a really good retro designer named Dave Sheldon before we did *Ren & Stimpy* and it dawned on me that he would be good to design some of the commercials.

I had Dave design the first "Powdered Toast" commercial and he drew hilarious 1950s-style versions of Ren & Stimpy, but Nickelodeon flatly refused to let us do it. They thought it would confuse the kids.
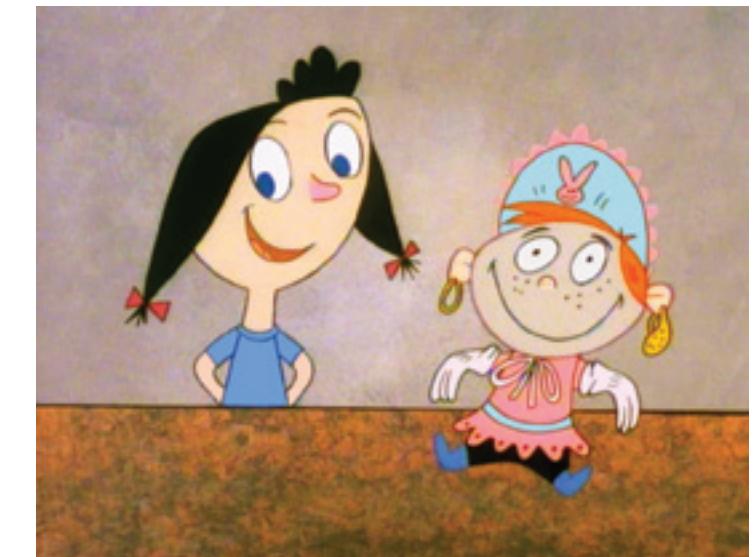
Opposite page:
"My Little Brother Doll" 'commercial' for the 1991 episode "Untamed World" designed by David Sheldon.

The New Korean War

The animation that Carbunkle did in season one of *Ren & Stimpy* was spectacular. There was even some really good work done in Ottawa supervised by Jamie Ollif. Where we ran into problems was at the overseas Filipino studio. They were doing the assistant animation, cel Xeroxing and painting, and camera work. The tracings of the animation poses were not always accurate, the Xerox lines were flaking off the cels, and the cameramen ignored our sheet timing—which drove Bob Jaques nuts. He did a lot of the timing, not just for the Carbunkle episodes, but for some of the ones that were being animated in Ottawa too. Bob is a stickler for tight accuracy, and he was so upset by how cartoons like "Stimpy's Breakfast Tips" came out that he asked if he could go over to the Philippines and supervise the finishing of "Stimpy's Invention." Even with him there, catching everything he could, mistakes made it through production that shouldn't have. Overseas cartoons studios aren't built to follow instructions, and a lot of the hard work that was done at Spümcø would easily become undone after we sent it overseas.

At the beginning of season two, my producer Libby Simon asked if I would meet with Gregg Vanzo, who wanted to start a studio in Korea to do service work for me. I didn't know how that could work or how I could sell it to Nickelodeon. A new studio with no experience to work on a show as difficult as *Ren & Stimpy*? But Libby was adamant, so I met with Gregg. I told him all the problems we were having and wearily explained that I used a completely different production system than the other TV studios, which made it even harder to get the overseas crews to follow instructions.

I took him through my system and explained that I needed the animators and assistants to use the drawings we did in the layouts for their key poses, not to tone them down or make them look like the model sheets. I drew an example for him, and then I screened "Space Madness" and "Stimpy's Invention" for him to show the style of movement that Bob and Kelly had created. "I know your animators won't be able to do this quality, but it's at least a standard to aim for," I told him. If he promised and crossed his heart that he would follow my system, then I would risk going to Nickelodeon to pitch the idea of using a studio that didn't exist yet. He promised and I made the pitch. Sure enough, Nickelodeon thought I was crazy but Vanessa went to bat for me, as she did many times, even with others yelling at her. I told Gregg he had a studio now and he went to Korea to start up Rough Draft.

Gregg himself was a very good animator, and he was married to a Korean, Nikki Vanzo, who had experience leading ink-and-paint departments at other Korean studios. Together they built the new studio, and to my surprise, when their first cartoon came back, it was great! Not only did they use the layouts, follow the timing, and do a good job cleaning it up, but Gregg also contributed some animation techniques that I hadn't seen before. He actually added creativity to the cartoons. I still sent my favorite episodes to Carbunkle, knowing they were the best, but the Rough Draft cartoons kept getting better and better. They were advancing in quality like the rest of our departments were, and I had never seen that happen in any Asian service studio. Gregg and Rough Draft took my system and developed their end of it so well that they quickly became the most sought after service studio in Asia. You could always tell when another show was animated there because it moved like *Ren & Stimpy*.

DRAW SIMPLE
DRAW ONLY THE ELEMENTS THAT ARE IMPORTANT.
EYES MOUTH STRUCTURE + BODY ATTITUDE.
HANDS.
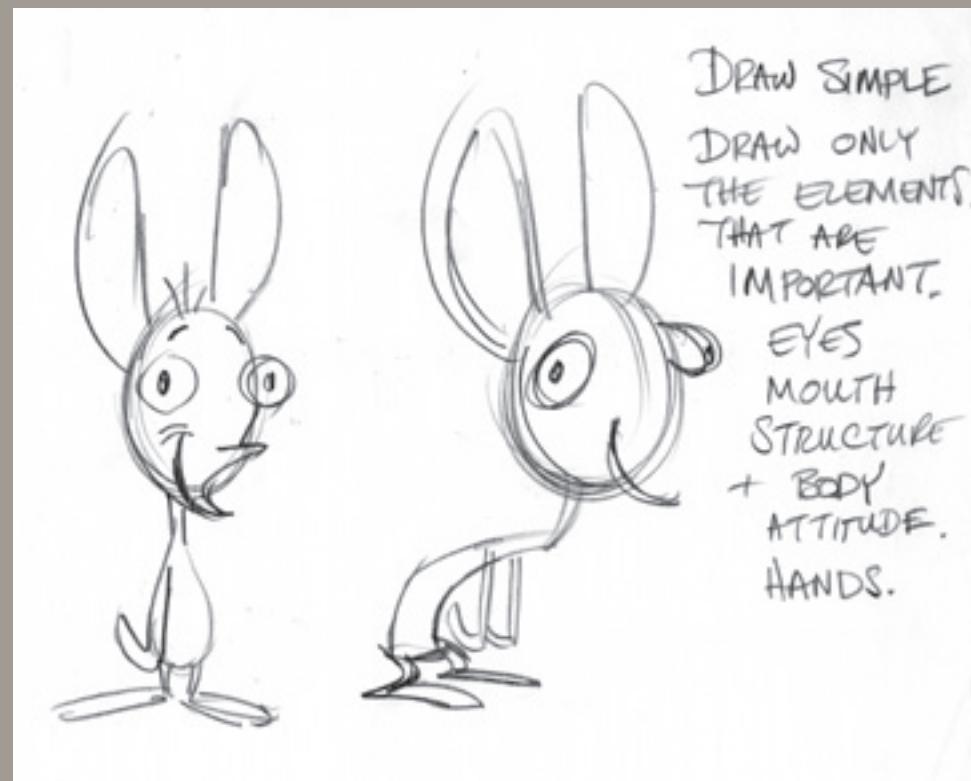
New Story People

At the beginning of the second season, one of my main storymen was gone for a month. Meanwhile, we had an order to start production on twenty episodes. My production assistant Richard Pursel was a funny guy who was always telling jokes and stories, so I gave him a shot sitting in on the story sessions with me, Vincent Waller, Jim Smith, and some of the other cartoonists. Rich came up with funny ideas for stories, so I gave him "Powdered Toast Man," and told him to write an outline for it. I sent it in to Nickelodeon and it was approved. Richard quickly became a staff writer on the show. Our stories were mostly started in group gag sessions, and then I would assign individuals to write up a story outline that we would then turn over to the storyboard artist who added more gags and continuity. As a final step, I usually went in to polish the dialogue and get everything in character. I would do this by turning out the lights and walking around my office acting out the scenes in character. The dialogue I improvised always came out more natural sounding than the dialogue that was "written." So I would rush to the storyboards and rewrite the dialogue according to my improvisations.

We hired more artists for the second season: Pete Avanzino, a storyboard artist on *The Simpsons*, who was funny and very good at continuity; Mike Kim, a superb draftsman who did some hilarious layouts on "Man's Best Friend" and other cartoons; and Stephen DeStefano, who did storyboards. Mike Fontanelli returned after a stint on *Tiny Toons* and did some incredible layouts for "Sven Hoek." Eddie Fitzgerald was drawing wacky layouts. Elinor Blake wrote some outlines and also drew some storyboards and layouts. I also hired some CalArts and Disney alumni to write timing on exposure sheets: Tony Fucile, Greg Manwaring, Doug Frankel and more.

Richard, Mike, Kaylene and Charlie at Spümcø.

Bob Camp, Elinor Blake, and Vincent Waller.

WOT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY?

BobCamp

Giving Bob Camp a Promotion

I needed more directors for the show, but that was the hardest position to fill. I was using a "unit system" like at Warner Bros., so I needed someone to helm each unit who had experience in various other departments of animation, was funny, and a good artist. No one fit all those requirements, but the funniest and fastest artist in the studio was Bob Camp. He had never animated, but he had a great drawing style and was hilarious. I figured he was our best bet to become my second director. I had to adapt my system to make up for the fact that Bob didn't have animation experience; I gave him his own personal timers to work with and set it up so that he could just do what he did best. He drew storyboards that were fairly tight, and layout artists usually toned them down, so instead of having a layout artist redraw his boards,

we Xeroxed them up into layouts and tightened up the loose ends. Like most of the crew, he sometimes didn't understand the characters as deeply as I did. He would sometimes have Stimpy be the mean one and Ren be the victim, so I would point these things out and have him change them.

The first cartoon he directed was "In The Army." Bob also directed "Out West" (below) which I sent to Carbunkle to give it the A-treatment. I suggested to Bob that he should do a song sequence called "The Lord Loves a Hangin'" at the end and to make it really upbeat and happy. He and Jim Smith wrote the song and performed it, and the audience loved it. Of course, Bob contributed jokes and drawings to many of the episodes I directed too.

Vincent Waller

I was a big fan of Vincent Waller's storyboards on the first season episodes "The Boy Who Cried Rat" and "The Littlest Giant" among others. Vincent's style is very unique and is not heavily influenced by animated cartoons in the same way my style and some of the other Spümcø artists' styles are. He is naturally more like an underground cartoonist, a bit like Robert Crumb's style. I loved the contrast between Vincent's style and the other cartoonists. I think of his cartoons as cartoons for the "everyman." They are gritty, down to earth, and deal with subject matter and emotions that the average guy can relate to—akin to director Bob McKimson's role at Warner Bros.

In the middle of season two, I gave him a shot at directing, and set him up in a situation similar to Bob Camp's. Besides being a great talent, Vincent is a hard worker and he took to the job with vigor. He even taught himself timing.

Vincent directed "Rubber Nipple Salesmen," "Big Baby Scam," and began some other cartoons that were taken over by Nickelodeon. We had a scene in "Rubber Nipple Salesman" where Ren and Stimpy go to George Liquor's house to try to sell him some nipples and he comes out and thinks they are game and shoots them. This got soundly rejected by Nickelodeon, and at the last minute we had to come up with a scene to replace it. It was the end of a workday and I was sitting in with the story crew—Vincent, Bob Camp, Richard Pursel, Elinor Blake, and Jim Smith—and someone suggested Ren and Stimpy go to Mr. Horse's house and the whole scene popped into my head. I pictured Mr. Horse in a rubber nipple suit acting all guilty as if he's been caught by the FBI for engaging in some crime (at right). He suspects Ren and Stimpy have been sent to "get him" and becomes paranoid and insane until he realizes they really are just Rubber Nipple Salesmen. I kept acting him out in the room, and everyone pitched in funny lines for him, and the scene got more and more intense. We wrote it up fast, sent it to Nickelodeon, not expecting it to go through, and to everyone's surprise, it didn't get a single note. It was one of the most disturbing scenes in any *Ren & Stimpy* episode—certainly more so than any *George Liquor* cartoon. Greg Manwaring, one of the animation timers, liked it so much, he took some of the Mr. Horse scenes and animated them himself to make it more intense. For years after, people would come up to me and whisper "Call the Poleeeeece."

The Dog Eat Dog World of Cartoons

All the time I spent training new crews and starting new studios and adapting my system for new directors didn't help me do what I really wanted to do—direct my own episodes and have some fun myself. On top of that, the network's notes kept getting longer and more nonsensical. Entire episodes that had been approved previously were being "reassessed" and thrown out, driving the budget up and pushing the schedule back. At some point Libby, my producer, calculated the overages and realized we couldn't even do layouts on every episode. In the midst of all this stress and chaos, Vanessa showed up at the studio one day to ask me to make a Ren and Stimpy movie! You would think that would be great news, but we were having so much trouble getting the series out that I asked her to please postpone the movie until we finished the second season.

For some reason, this was an unacceptable answer and soon people reported to me that Nickelodeon was making separate deals with people on my crew to do the movie—and even the show—without me. I didn't believe it until I walked in on someone who I had given all the greatest opportunities in the world to talking on the phone to Vanessa about that very thing.

We found out that Nickelodeon had been wanting to start their own in-house animation studio and planned to use my studio and part of my crew as its foundation. Nickelodeon lured people over to their studio with big pay raises and the added enticement of promising just about anybody a shot at directing. Some took the bait, but most of the core crew stayed with Spümcø including Vincent Waller, Mike Fontanelli, Eddie Fitzgerald, Jim Smith, Elinor Blake, Richard Pursel, and Libby Simon.

They stopped paying us for a month, Spümcø ran out of paychecks for the crew, and one morning a big van showed up. Eric Coleman (Vanessa's gofer, if I remember correctly) nervously walked in with Roy Smith, a terrific artist who became one of Vanessa's many assistant producers, and let me know they were gonna pack up all the art and take it away.

That was it.

I had mixed feelings about the show ending. One was relief from the stress. Another was sadness about the loss of my characters. All my characters, and *Ren & Stimpy* especially, are very real to me. The worst feeling though was my sick disbelief that some cartoonists had actually aided in the destruction of all the great advances we had made—cartoonists who, until Ren and Stimpy, had been oppressed by the Saturday morning cartoon business themselves. I had finally restored a system that encouraged creative input by cartoonists, and gave them dignity. *Ren & Stimpy* and Spümcø made us cartoonists stars again.

It wasn't just a show; it was an environment that did not exist in the contemporary cartoon business before I set it up. You can't make great cartoons by good ideas alone, or even star characters. You need an environment that allows for creativity and evolution to occur. It happened at Spümcø and then disappeared as a few short-sighted artists willingly threw themselves and the rest of us back into the fire.
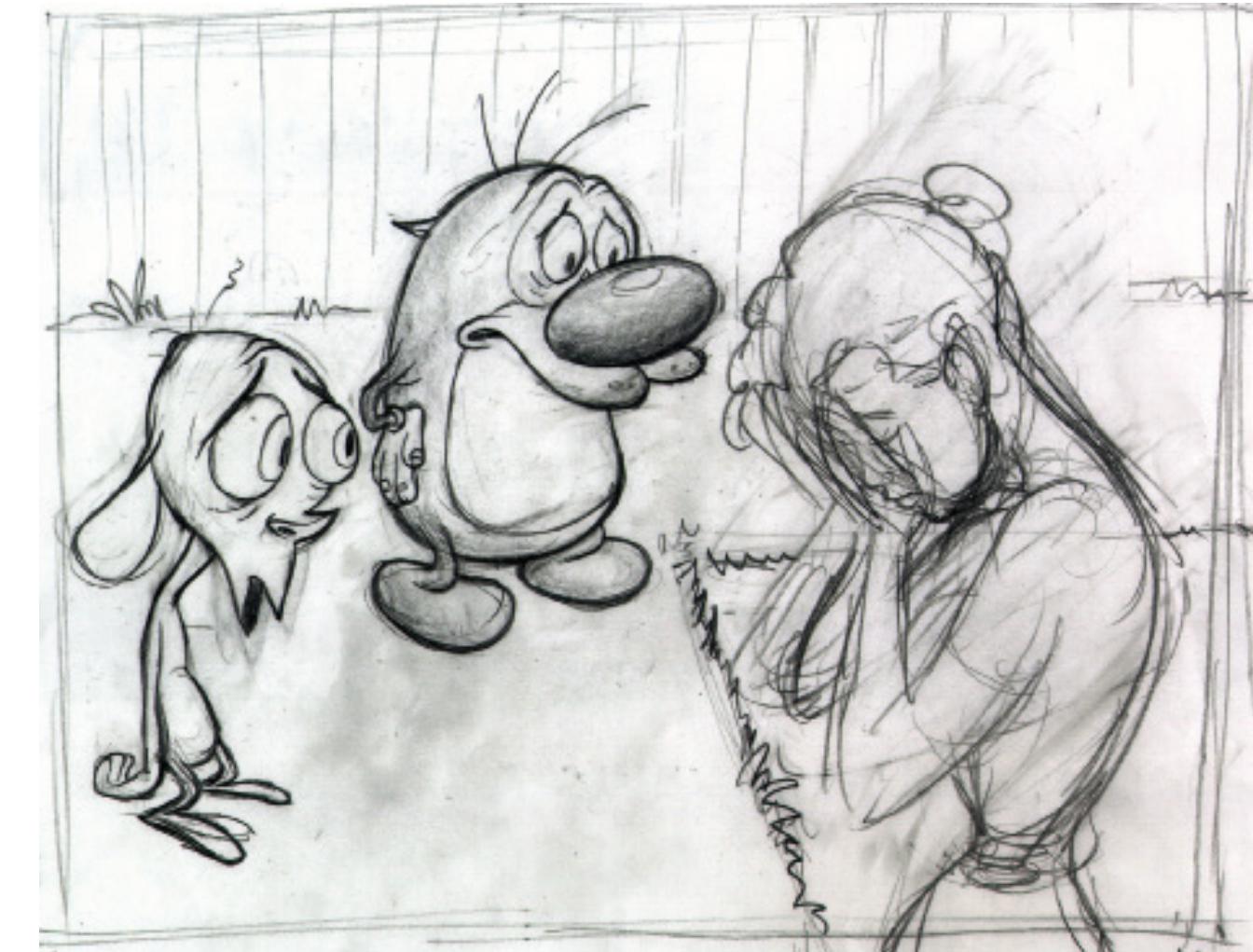
George and Jimmy

Around 1980, Bob Jaques and I were driving down Van Nuys Boulevard, when I saw something that made me scream, "Stop! Stop! Pull over Bob!" Bob screeched to a stop in front of a tiny liquor store that had a huge neon sign that read, "GEORGE LIQUOR." Not "George's Liquor"—just George Liquor. In that instant, a picture appeared in my head of this bug-eyed drunken Republican with a shotgun looking for something to kill in the wilderness. As soon as I got home I drew up the image. This was the only time a character appeared as a full-blown developed personality and design in my head. I knew everything about this guy, and added him to the Ren and Stimpy stories I had started developing.

Yessir

In *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, George Liquor was Ren and Stimpy's master. He was part of the original presentation pitch and was in many of the stories I wrote before selling the show to Nickelodeon. To me, he was integral to the show's dynamic.

After we sold the series, all my George stories kept getting rejected. I found out that they didn't like his views because he was a Republican—actually in my cartoon universe, far right of any real Republican. A caricature. The idea was like Archie Bunker; he was a character that some people would like because they agreed with his views, and those who disagreed with him would like him too because we were making fun of the type.

GEORGE LIQUOR- Donny Chickenchild's Dad.
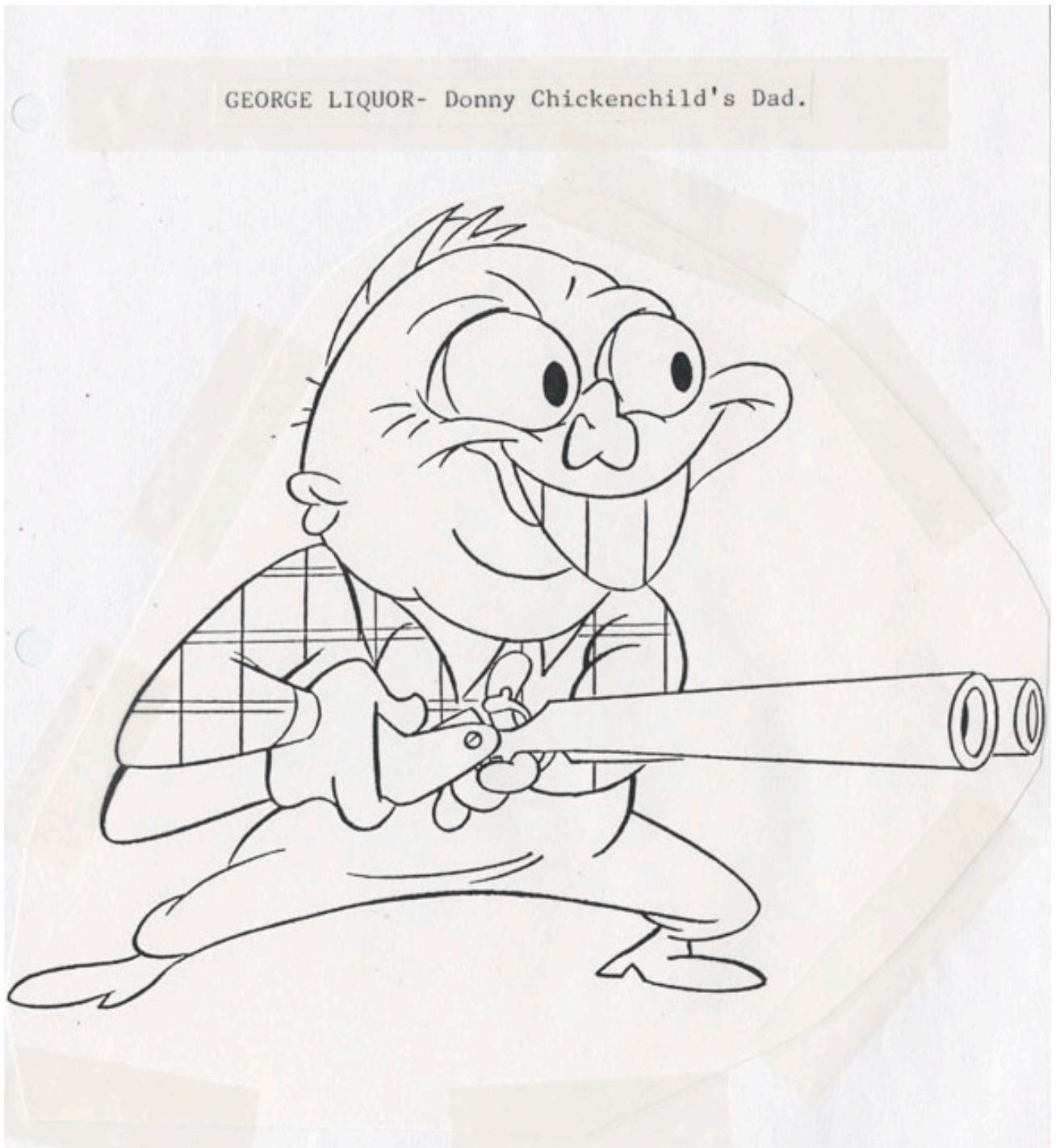
An early George Liquor, circa late 1980s.

SHHHH....

GEO starts to TURN SLOW

ARE WE IN the DEEP WOODS YET?

....HHHHH

George Liquor in the unproduced "Wilderness Adventure", circa 1990s.

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The Liquor Personality

George isn't merely a generic Republican; he has specific traits. He has a lot of my dad in him—a strict disciplinarian who believes in rules, hard work, hanging onto money, and pain. But unlike my dad, George is a puritan who loves God and the Bible—which he misquotes from constantly. He has unique qualities that can't be put into words—his look, his mannerisms, and eventually his voice, which was brought to life by the great actor Michael Pataki.
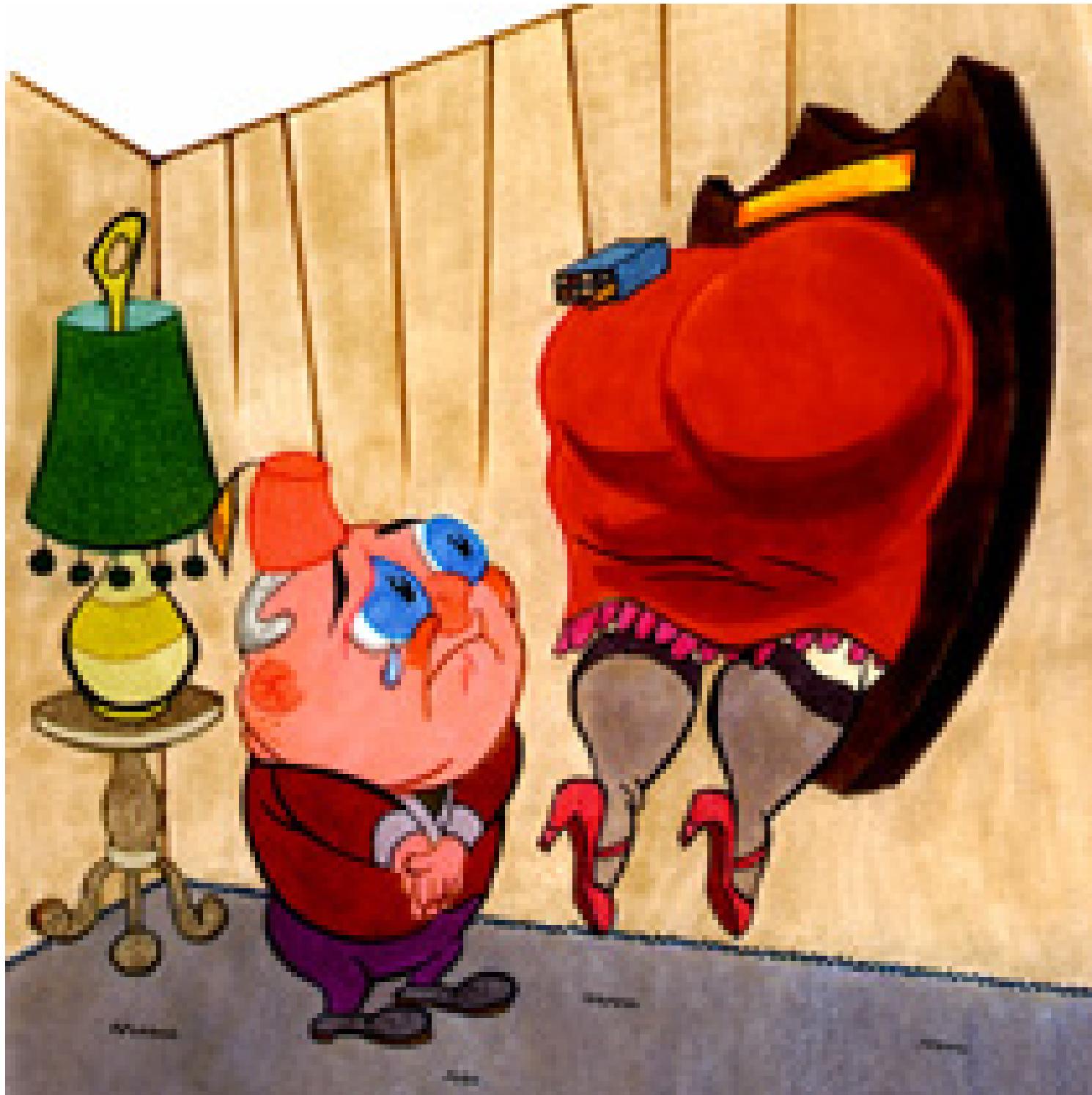
George Liquor illustrations and studies, late 1990s–2000s.

I think what distinguishes the Spümcø style from other contemporary cartoons is not the grossness or edginess—lots of subsequent cartoons have out-grossed and out-edged us—but the richness of our characters, and the fact that some of my characters are specifically delineated and have lots of individual traits.

My stories usually come out of the characters' personalities, and George is the richest of all my characters. He is easy to write for because I understand him to his core.

When Nickelodeon took over *The Ren & Stimpy Show* in 1992, we had to make all kinds of legal agreements to make the split official. They hated George Liquor, so I asked for him back, and even though they had no intention of ever using him, they didn't want me too either. I managed to get him back with the stipulation that I never depict him as a mass murderer, rapist, or worse. This is what they must have thought were common traits of Republicans.

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George Teamed With Jimmy

Now that I had George back, he was a lonely character. He no longer had Ren and Stimpy to play against. I thought about "Wilderness Adventure," the Jimmy story I had pitched to Gerry Laybourne and the Nickelodeon execs. In that story, Jimmy's dad is a Kirk Douglas character, much like my own dad, and I realized George would fit right into the dad role from the Jimmy stories. I put them together and built a world of situations and characters around them.

George is a hard man, and he also loves hard. He has recently lost his beloved wife Mabel and is taking it poorly, when from out of the blue, the Lord sends him a helpless idiot to share his love with. Jimmy comes crashing into George's front door on a mangled tricycle and God's rays beam down upon him. George drops to his knees, and with tears in his eyes, thanks the Lord for sending him someone to share his swollen heart with. Jimmy is the perfect creature for a man like George to love because he will obey him unquestioningly—a malleable idiot. He won't talk back or become a dirty hippie or Communist. While the rest of the world decays around George, he has at least one person he can mold and raise into an honest, decent, rule-loving American.

Left: Jimmy painting, late 1990s.

Below: a preliminary study for Jimmy, early 1990s.
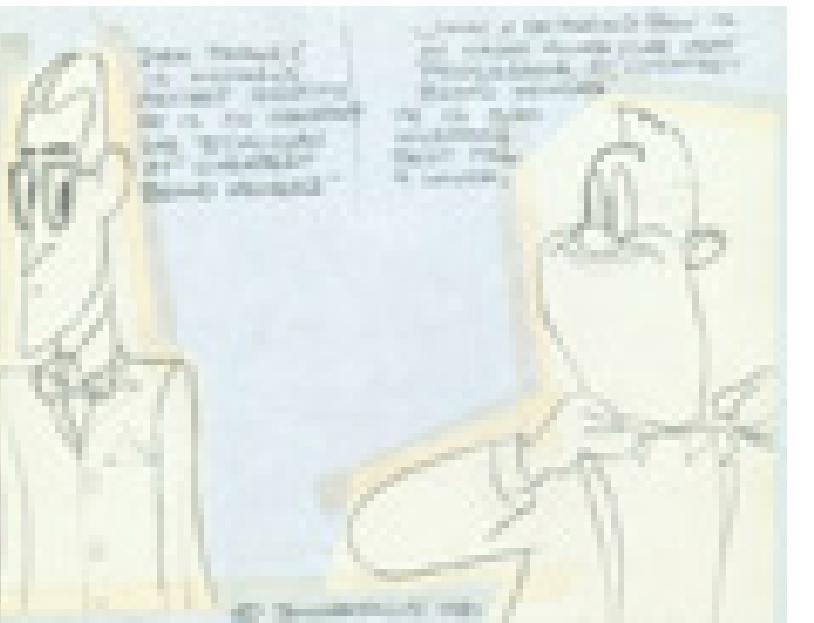
Jimmy The Idiot Boy

Jimmy the Idiot Boy was originally pretty simple. Well, he still is. Sometimes I call him "Jimmy the Lovable Simpleton." I based some of his antics on actual retarded people I knew growing up. He foams at the sides of his mouth, gets "retard strength" when aggravated, and chases pretty girls and has to be torn off of them.

Unlike George, who could really exist, Jimmy is a pure cartoon character. He is impossible and has magic abilities, not unlike Stimpy. Jimmy, who was based on a caricature I did at the racetrack, originated in the early-1980s, first as a sidekick to Brik Blastoff of the Outback, and later as a sidekick to another early character, Mildman.

Eventually, I redrew him minus the huge chin, and this even funnier looking version was called "Jimmy the Idiot Boy." His basic trait was that he constantly hurt himself doing the simplest things, and I wrote many gags and scenarios using this concept.

A Jimmy style sheet from Popular, mid-1980s.

Fox Pitch

My producer at the time, Libby Simon, set up meetings with lots of people after the Nickelodeon breakup: Aerosmith, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Madonna's people, producer Joel Silver, John Hughes, Tom Waits, and Graham Nash of Crosby, Stills & Nash among many others. One person we worked with in the early-'90s was Ari Emanuel, an agent at International Creative Management (ICM) and a big fan of *The Ren and Stimpy Show.* (He later cofounded the Endeavor agency.) He wanted to rep me and set up a meeting so I could show him what projects I had. I pitched him and a team of agents at ICM all kinds of show ideas, including *The George Liquor Program.* He loved George Liquor and thought it would be an easy sell.

He took me to the head of FOX television programming where Sandy Grushow, a severely serious, bulky man and ex-football player, was sitting behind his big desk staring at us as if we were some kind of nasty irritants. Ari introduced me and said I had a great new concept for an animated sitcom. I had a copy of "Man's Best Friend" with me, and told him that the main character was from *Ren & Stimpy*, which he knew to be highly successful. He shoved the tape into his VCR, turned around with his feet up on his bookshelf, and watched the cartoon.

Soon a smile reluctantly spread across his granite head. Then he started to shake all over, which was followed by loud guffaws and huge bellows, and things flying off his desk. By the time the cartoon was over he was wiping tears from his eyes and still convulsing from laughter.

Then I took out my presentation for George Liquor's own show and pitched it live to Mr. Grushow. I even pitched a pilot story. Again, he shook the whole room with laughter. After the pitch, he proclaimed, "I love this Liquor guy! I'm putting this right into development!" We left the office with Ari slapping Sandy's back, and everyone smiling and shaking hands.

Grushow called us in again to assign us a "development executive." It was a serious woman who had recently come over from MTV. She politely and efficiently told me how impressed she was with the success of *Ren & Stimpy*. Grushow ordered her to work with me to develop the show and produce a pilot script. I asked him if I could do a pilot storyboard instead, and he said, "Anything, anything boy, just bring me back a first episode."

As soon as we were out of his room and into the development executive's office, the atmosphere changed. She told me right away that I would have to conform to a primetime audience's expectations of what a cartoon was about. "*Ren & Stimpy* is great for kids, but adults don't like slapstick," she explained. Having nothing whatsoever to do with *The Simpsons*, she confidently explained what made FOX's signature show so successful. "The reason *The Simpsons* works for adults is that nothing ever happens. They sit on the couch and make wise cracks to each other. It's like real life." Obviously that's not a very good description of the iconic show, but that was the formula she wanted me to adhere to. I explained that my idea was a blend of classic family sitcom humor and impossible cartoon humor, and that these elements would distinguish my show from *The Simpsons*, complementing it rather than looking like a cheap imitation. Her face tightened and she sent me off to start working.

Richard Pursel, Vincent Waller, Jim Smith, and I started storyboarding and filling out the pilot story that Sandy Grushow had laughed so hard at. I would bring in sequences of storyboards for the executive's approval. At the second meeting, the serious executive introduced me to a trainee executive, a much more pleasant, easygoing woman. I showed the storyboard and acted it all out. The junior executive laughed at everything while the senior kept shooting stern looks at her. After the pitch, the senior again stressed that I had too much slapstick and impossible scenes that adults wouldn't accept and told me to cut them out. As I left, I overheard her lecturing the junior executive to, "Never show your true feelings to a creative."

We had two or three more meetings like this. Each time we filled out and made changes to the storyboard according to the executive's rules and instructions. There were some visual gags that were so funny that I had to put them in, thinking that the sheer humor would sway her into allowing us some leeway with the direction of the story. Each time I did, the junior exec loved them and the senior hated them.

Finally, we finished an unwieldy, awkward, and convoluted storyboard, and Ari arranged another pitch meeting with Sandy Grushow. The executive ladies sat against the wall, stiff and silent, as I did my best to act out and pitch the story that had been totally watered down and made less sensible than what I had originally offered Grushow. He barely laughed. Instead he looked surprised and pissed. We were back to being irritants. The women looked at each other with fear in their eyes.

We left with Ari promising Grushow that we would fix it all up and make it funny again but it was too late.

Fox passed.

Spümcø merchandizing artwork, circa mid-1990s.

Comic Book

In 1994, Mort Todd, a comic book artist/writer/editor asked me if I had ever considered doing comics. He liked my cartoons and thought there could be a market for comic books in the same vein. He made Spümcø a deal with Marvel Comics to do a comic series based on George Liquor and his gang, a completely atypical concept for Marvel, whose forte was super heroes. What I had was an animated sitcom.

I didn't have any experience drawing or writing comics, but knew that we couldn't approach it the same way we approached animation. Jim Smith and I drew the first issue. Around that time, a fan of ours visited Spümcø and wanted to work for us. His name was Shane Glines. He showed me his portfolio that was full of well-drawn Don Bluth style characters, poses, and expressions. Shane was a fan of many other artists too, in particular Frank Frazetta, which was fine but I told him he should try to find his own look. Shane had a great brush inking style, and ended up inking our comics. I introduced him to many cartoonists he didn't know about, like Rod Scribner, Owen Fitzgerald, George Clark, and more. He scoured my library, discovered Collier's magazine in my collection, and became even more obsessed than me about finding out about old cartoonists and illustrators.

Marvel put out one issue of the comic book, which we called *Comic Book*, before realizing that it really wasn't their thing. They didn't know how to market it, and the whole comic book industry was in the middle of a slump anyway. Shortly afterwards, Mike Richardson of Dark Horse Comics showed up and said he would continue the series with us. I hired Mike Fontanelli and Vincent Waller to draw some stories, and we continued our tradition of having each artist draw in their own style. We all drew the characters differently which was a tradition long accepted in comic books.

We learned the differences between telling stories in animation and telling them in still drawing continuity by trial-and-error, and each issue became stronger and better.

By the fourth Dark Horse issue, the distribution system in comics had dwindled so much that we couldn't get enough issues into stores to justify the costs of the printing, so *Comic Book*, along with many other comics at the time, was cancelled.

I also made the mistake of asking for the comic to be printed in a larger format and to return to the old, cheap four-color printing process. Unfortunately, what used to be cheap turned out to be more expensive, simply because no one else did it anymore. This made the retail price of the comics ridiculously expensive—$5.95

each—which I thought was outrageous and defeated the purpose of being a comic.

Soon, however, I discovered an exciting new distribution medium for my characters that had none of the restrictions imposed upon us by either comics or TV animation.

*Comic Book* No. 3, 1997, Dark Horse Comics.
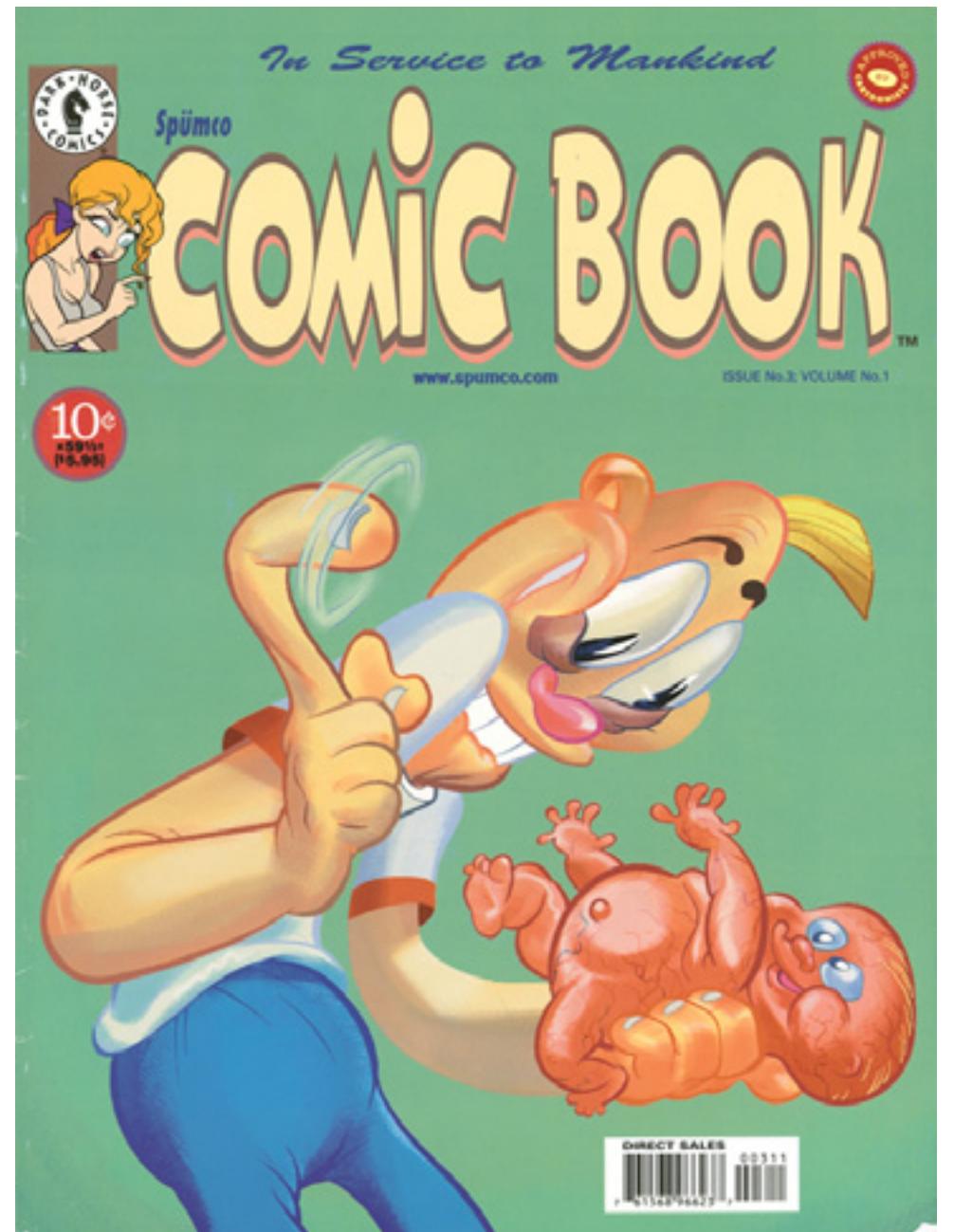
Comic Book No. 2, 1997, Dark Horse Comics.
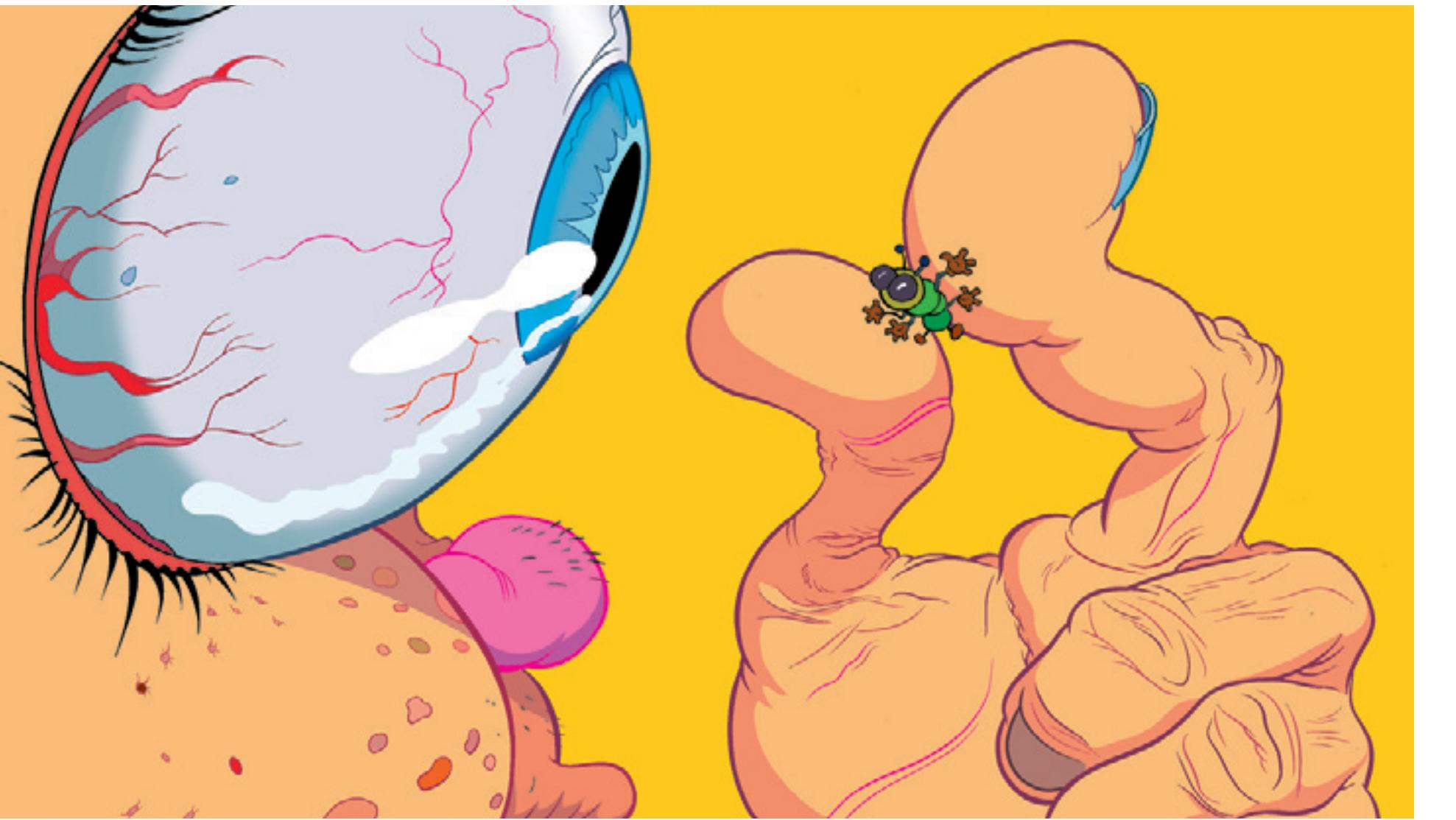
A close-up panel and page
from *Comic Book* No. 1, 1995,
Dark Horse Comics.
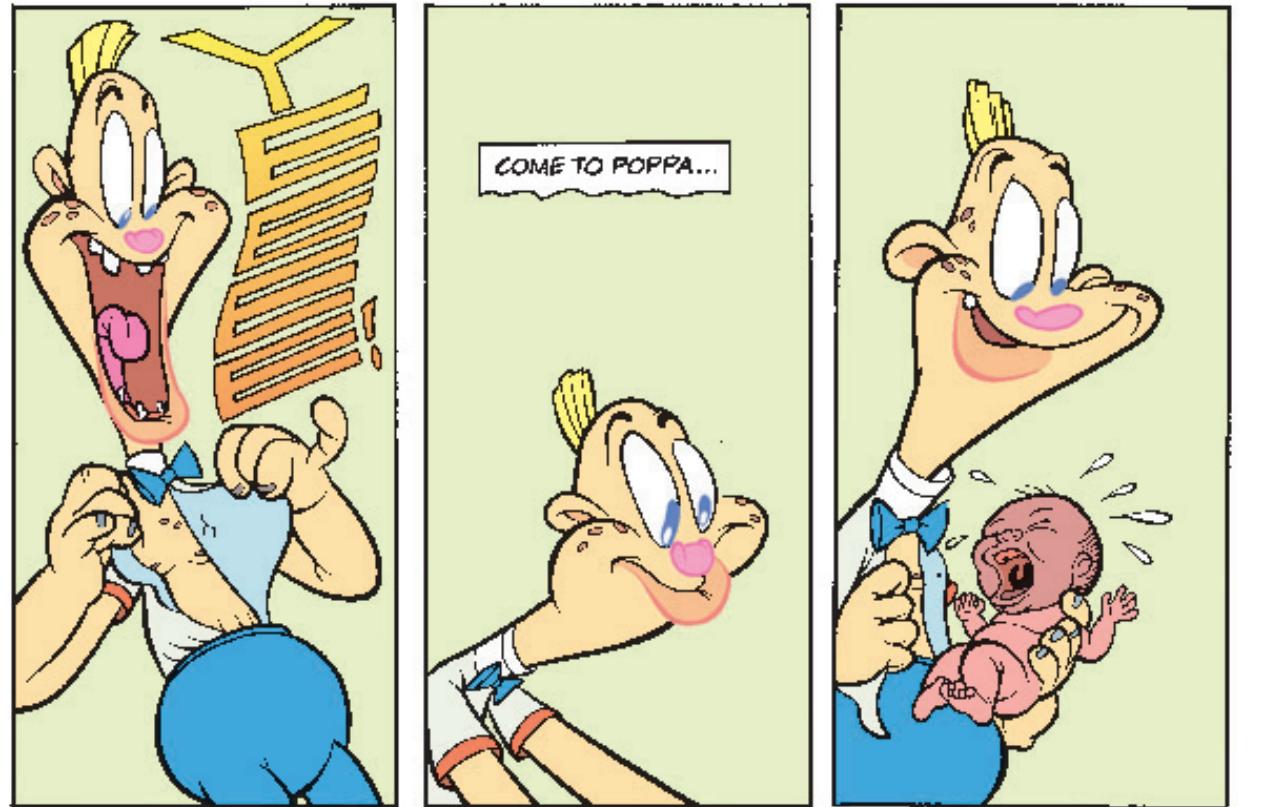
Jimmy is confused, from
Comic Book No. 4, 1997
Dark Horse Comics.
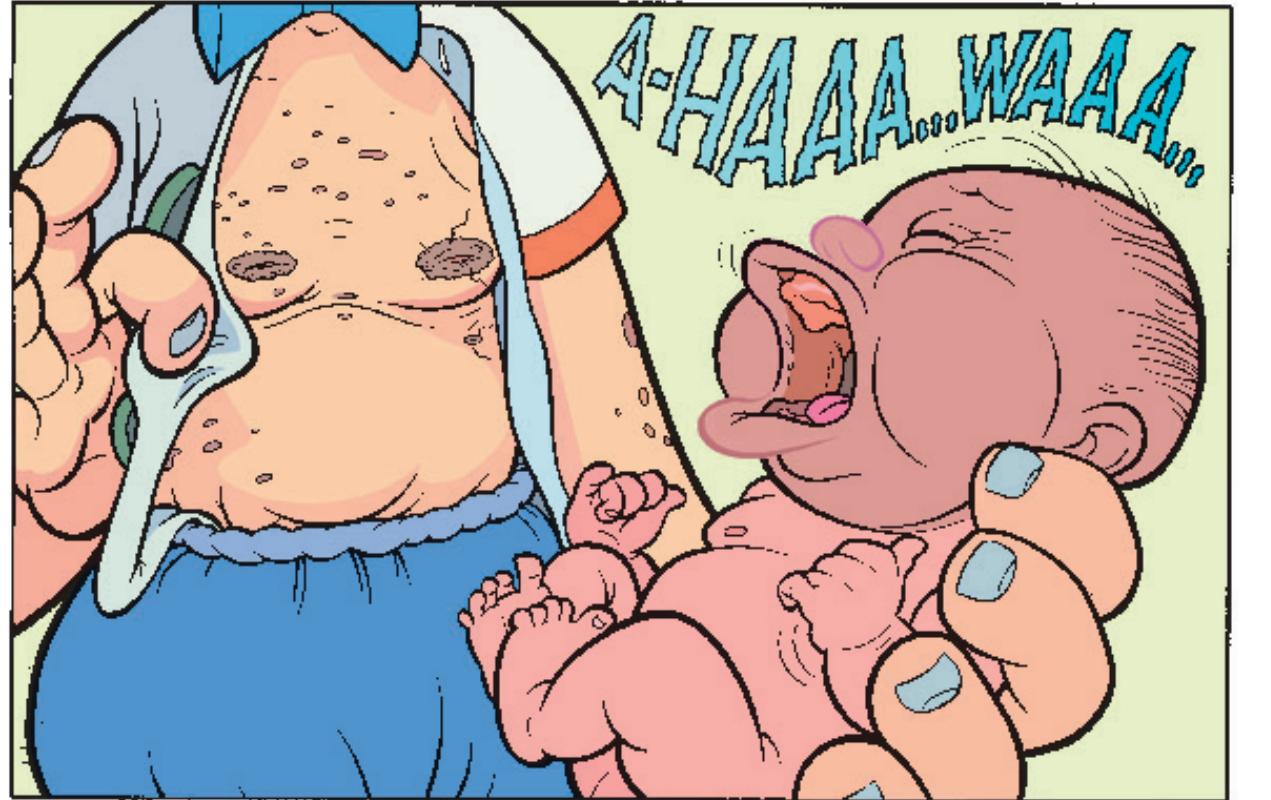
An enraged George from
Comic Book No. 2, 1997,
Dark Horse Comics.
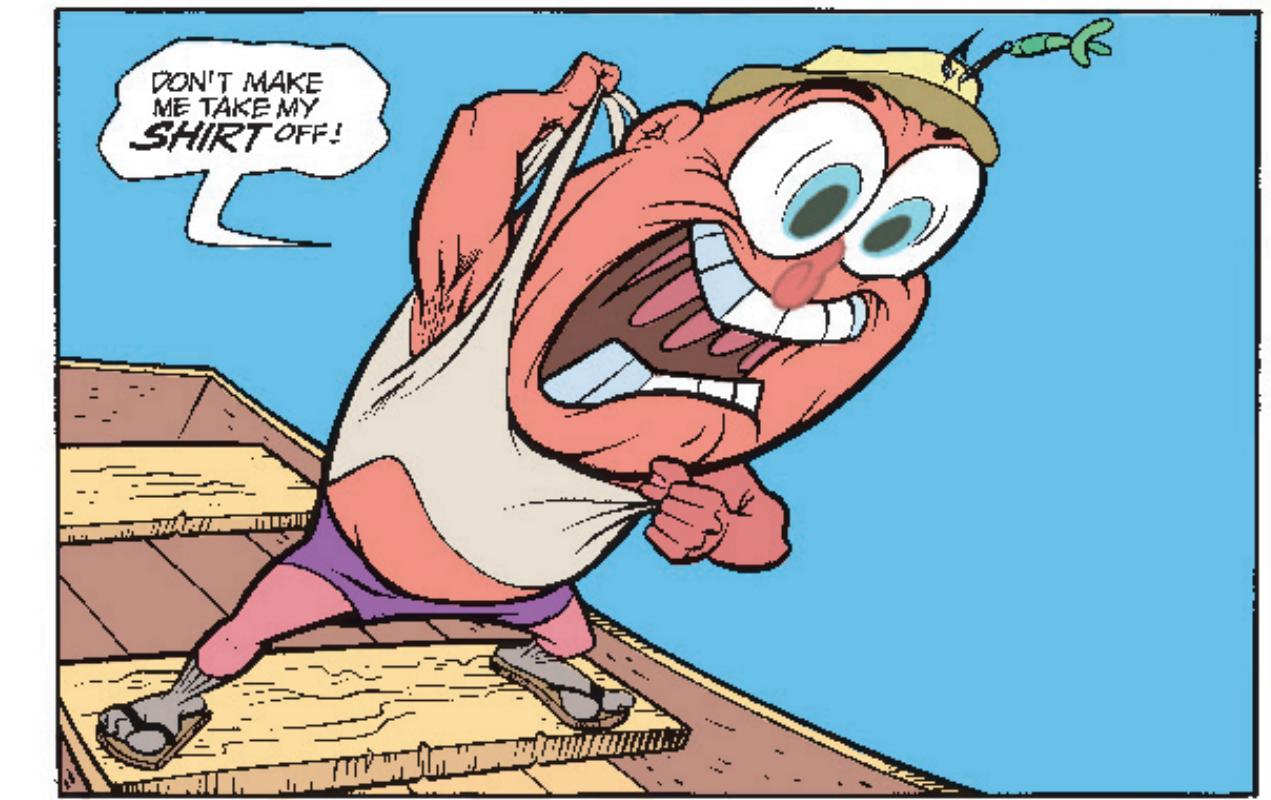
Jimmy gets excited from *Comic Book* No. 3, 1997, Dark Horse Comics.
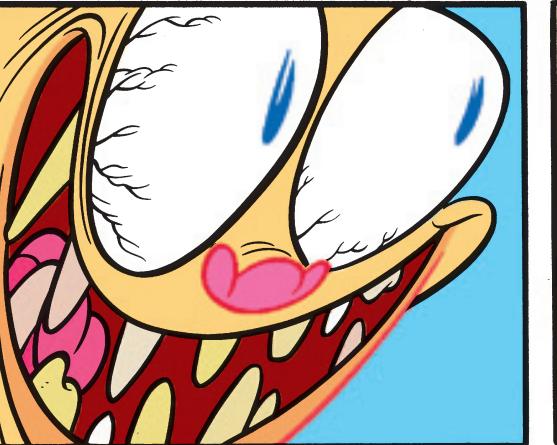
I Invent the Internet

In the mid-1990s, cartoon fan Michelle Klein-Haas tried to explain to me that the "Web" was something new, and that it now had pictures and "links." Prior to this, I had used the Internet only to speak with cartoon fans in the newsgroups, but the instant I saw the first websites, I recognized the future of communication. This was a new medium, potentially superior to any that came before. I realized that this could be a way to communicate directly with an audience without the myriad levels of middle-management, network executives, focus groups, and marketers in between. Traditionally, by the time you actually hurdle all these obstacles, you are lucky if the finished product on screen has anything to do with what you originally created.

Even while I was imagining this glorious new world that was coming, I had to wait for a medium that could actually present animation on-line. The Web was super slow at the time, and you had to wait a couple minutes for a crude page to appear on the screen.

About a year later, in 1996, Microsoft began adding multimedia content to their MSN network. Microsoft was running some primitive soap operas, made of successive still pictures of live actors. I can't remember if they had sound or not. Microsoft came to Spümcø to see if I would be interested in making some cartoons for MSN. Of course, I was, and one of their guys told me about a new software program called FutureSplash Animator. He had a demo of it and showed me a game or something that had simple interactivity built into it. I had found what I wanted.

The MSN guy gave me all kinds of warnings and rules about FutureSplash. "Don't try to do dialogue animation because there is no way to synch the sound to the picture," and stuff like that. My eyes were glazing over as he told me the list of "don't-dos." I wanted to get him out the door so I could get started. He offered to be our technical director, but I needed someone in-house who had experience with the tool, and was eager to expand its capabilities.

After the meeting, my producer Kevin Kolde told me that a girl had interviewed for a job a week earlier, and she worked with FutureSplash. Her name was AnnMarie Ashkar, and she was a big *Ren & Stimpy* fan. She even knew who George Liquor and Jimmy were, because she bought our comics and followed everything we did in the press.

We hired her right away and she showed me some stuff that she and others had done with FutureSplash. The program was designed for making animated banner ads, but a few people had taken baby steps beyond that. She had made a website with the software that had some characters in a bar. When you clicked characters, something would happen. She had also worked at Disney Online where they were making FutureSplash sites that had activities and games. So far no one had tried to make actual cartoons and stories.

MSN gave us a development deal to start making *Weekend Pussy Hunt*, an epic film noir cartoon that was originally intended to be a graphic novel. Jim Smith laid out the entire story in comic book form, and we had to translate it to FutureSplash. Unfortunately, Microsoft got out of the cartoon business soon after, and left us with the project barely started.

The Goddamn
George Liquor Program

Even before we started animating *Weekend Pussy Hunt*, AnnMarie and I decided that we would start another series called *The Goddamn George Liquor Program* which would premier in 1997. The first thing we did was make a list of what you couldn't do, and then we set out to do those very things.

We made the first episode *The Goddamn George Liquor Program* in a couple months. It had a title sequence, music, a story, and dialogue. We figured out a way to break up sentences into small audio bits, and synch the beginning of each word or two to the first mouth in the phrase. Then if it fell out of synch for a couple frames, it would snap back on the next sentence and no one (but animators) would notice. I started promoting my new distribution medium by calling up

all the magazines that had done *Ren & Stimpy* stories and inviting them over to the studio to see what we were doing now. The news spread fast.

In the meantime, FutureSplash sold their company to Macromedia, and the software was renamed Flash. The folks there got wind of what we were doing and came to visit. They were blown away by seeing an actual living cartoon with characters walking, talking, and doing crazy things. For the next couple of years, they kept sending us their technical teams and marketers to have brainstorming sessions with us. We would list all of our wants and desired changes to the program. They used some of my suggestions, but the most important ones that could have made Flash much more user-friendly to animators never quite sunk in. To this day, I'm looking

for someone to let me design a working animation program that doesn't make you tear your hair out.

We launched the first Internet cartoon in 1997 to a lot of press, but our audience was limited. There was so much art in the episode that it could take 10 minutes to download.

I thought about how *Ren & Stimpy* was directly aimed at kids, but it also had a large adult fan base. We wrote quite a few stories that were combinations of cartoon and sitcom humor. I've been hugely influenced by classic sitcoms and shows, like *The Honeymooners*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Get Smart*, *All In The Family*

Jimmy and George react differently to the arrival of the alluring Sody Pop from *The Goddamn George Liquor Show*, 1997.

The Flash software allowed us a bit more flexibility and so we tried different camera angles and created three sets of poses for this single scene where Sody meets George and Jimmy. Such experimenting allowed us to arrive at the best solution, pictured here last.

and *The Jack Benny Program*. I inject a lot of what I've absorbed from my favorite sitcoms into my cartoons, and I wanted to build on that with *George Liquor*.

    The Goddamn George Liquor Program was partly in the genre of *The Simpsons*, but was a lot freer creatively, because we were using both impossible cartoon humor and live-action influenced acting to sell the personalities.

Mike Pataki
the Voice of George Liquor

When I was casting for the voice of George Liquor during production on *Ren & Stimpy*, I knew I wanted him to have a gravelly voice, and I used Harris Peet in a couple cameo scenes for the show's first season. Harris was great and I also hired him for other burly characters such as the fire chief in "Fire Dogs."

In the second season, when I was finally allowed to make a few cartoons that featured George as a main character, I was casting for a new voice, and I remembered the voice of the Cow from the Mighty Mouse cartoons I'd done with Ralph Bakshi. The sound of Mike Pataki's voice was more than just gravelly, it had a unique character to it. I found Pataki's agent, and invited Mike over for an audition. I didn't know what to expect; I had never met Mike before because Ralph had directed him as the Cow in "Night of the Bat-Bat." In walked George Liquor in the flesh. He was built like him, he looked like him, and he was loud and assertive like him. He had biceps that looked like baseballs. I showed Mike the storyboard for "Man's Best Friend," and acted it out, and he was instantly into it, ad-libbing his own lines and laughing at all the jokes.

Mike Pataki, circa 1990s.

I took him into the recording booth and I couldn't control him for anything. He wouldn't even wait for me to say, "Take 1." He started reading the script into the mike, repeating each line a thousand random ways as we tried to keep track of each take on our scripts. It was an impossible task. Mike wouldn't stop and wait for direction. Somewhere in the middle of the thousand readings of each single line, he would do one that had us on the floor laughing. He said, "What's this crap?" so many ways that we couldn't stop laughing for twenty minutes. The more we laughed at that line, the more ways he would come up with to say it—each one funnier than the last.

Mike's best readings had some kind of extra color and feeling that I never imagined when writing the story, but that filled out the character and enriched him.

The trick was to later find it among the mass of takes. At the end of the session, Mike came out of the recording booth drenched in sweat from head to toe, and proceeded to take his clothes off, while heaving and gasping for air. After he caught his breath, he started yelling all of George Liquor's lines again, waiting for the laughter that followed. All the way out the door and into the street, this buck naked, sweat-drenched inferno of a man was yelling, "Take it like a man!" "It's discipline that begets love!" and, "Oh, a smart mouth, eh?" scaring the living bejeezus out of everyone for miles around.

For every George recording we did afterwards, including the Internet series, Mike would show up in less and less clothing, knowing that he would take it all off anyway after the session.

Once I had done a handful of episodes of *The Goddamn George Liquor Program*, I began talking with Steve Stanford, an agent at William Morris Agency, who had the funding to start up an Internet cartoon network called Icebox. When he launched Icebox.com, he asked me to contribute a series. We picked up Weekend Pussy Hunt where we had left off and began producing it in earnest.

AnnMarie was the main animator, and she had a special talent for creating abstract title sequences. We would pick a piece of music we liked, and then AnnMarie would start making shapes and moving them around. Somehow this made the music more powerful and gave you the feeling of what the cartoon was going to be about. I don't know how she did that, but her titles had strong emotion and meaning.

But now, unlike the George Liquor cartoons that I was funding myself, and which came out sporadically, we had to gear up for a regular weekly series. The problem was the only people who knew how to make animation using Flash were a handful of us at Spümcø, and mainly, AnnMarie. So we had to start up a training program while we were still learning Flash ourselves.

Walkems

I came up with the idea of creating short animated "toys" that we'd insert into the cartoons like Easter Eggs or prizes in cereal. You had to play a game while watching the cartoon to win one of these toys. I called them "Walkems."

Walkems were little funny looking characters who did nothing except have a funny walk. We went through piles of my phone doodles, and picked out the funniest looking sketches and inked them. I figured if we hired a bunch of eager young interns and gave them the simple problem of taking a single drawing, breaking it up, and making it walk, they would learn the basics of Flash. Whoever was good at it, I would add to the crew of animators.

We put an ad on our Spümcø website that we were looking for cartoonists to train in Flash. We ended up hiring about thirty interns and put them all on an assembly line to make these Walkems. It worked better than I ever expected. These young guys and girls became Flash whizzes overnight.

Some were doing Walkems, but others were "optimizing" (taking our inked drawings, scanning them, and taking out tons of little vector points to reduce the file size). Our Flash cartoons were more elaborate than anybody else's, yet they downloaded much faster because of the way we optimized them. Some of the trainees were working on coloring in the characters. One trainee, Leticia Lacy, was working on a scene that didn't have all of the elements color-keyed for her, so she made some

choices herself and meekly showed them to me. I loved them! Leticia was a natural, and I started giving her more and more scenes to color key. She has gone on to become a top color stylist in the animation industry.

In fact, many of these interns have become the top Flash artists in today's business, including Eric Pringle, Gerald de Jesus, Tony Mora, Vinh Chung, Nikki Pontius, Dustin Wicke, and Katie Rice.

I also had a slightly earlier generation of talented interns who were drawing for me. Matt Danner was eighteen years old and doing layouts and animation on Weekend Pussy Hunt. Gabe Swarr had started as an intern and was doing layouts on the Internet cartoons. They both tried out these Walkems and took Flash beyond what we had previously done. They were naturals. Aaron Springer started as an intern at Spümcø a couple years prior to them, and he was a killer cartoonist with a very unique style. He drew some unbelievably intense and funny scenes for Weekend Pussy Hunt.

A gallery of Walkems characters, circa 1997.

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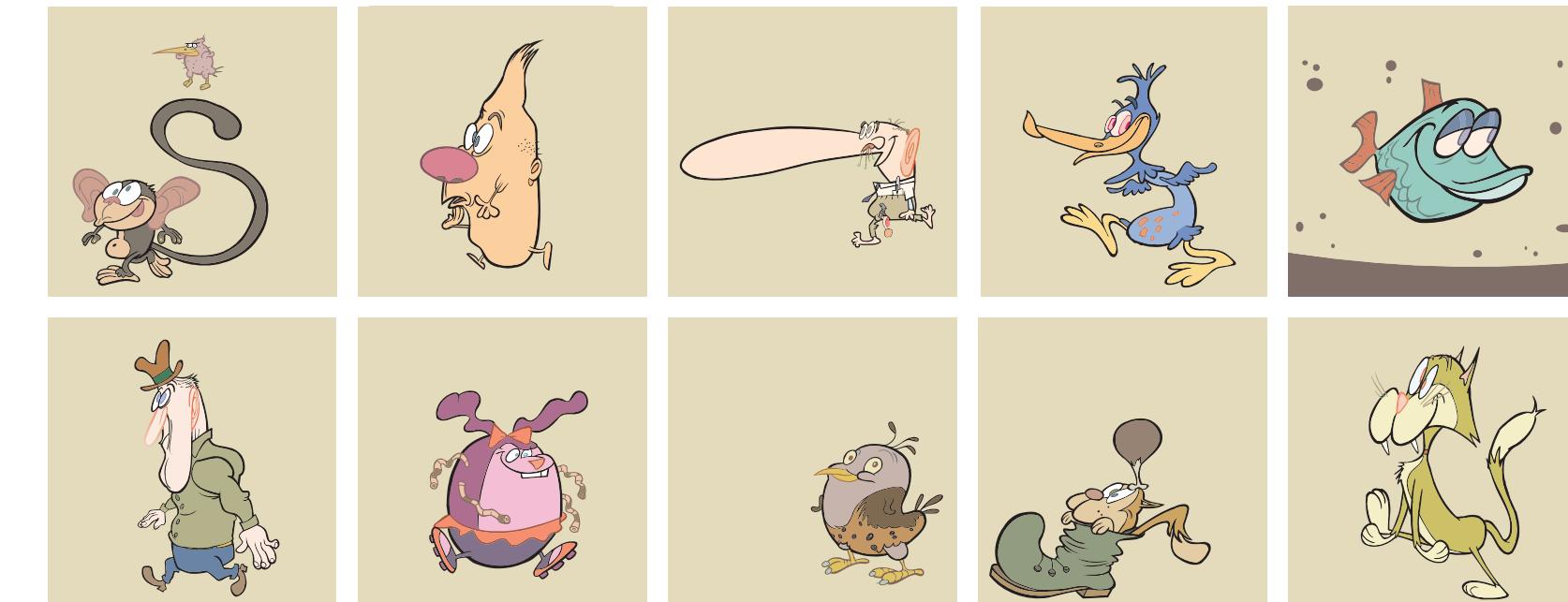
I had one guy, Paul Trauth, who did the first smooth Flash animation I had ever seen. Previous to Paul's work, we had been doing everything with drawings, then scanning them in. We didn't use the automated "tweening" mode in the software much because it made the drawings look like warped cut-outs, but one day in 1997 I was looking over Paul's shoulder as he animated the *Weekend Pussy Hunt* kissing scene shown on these pages and it was amazing. I didn't know Flash was capable of such smoothness. Nowadays, all Flash is super slippery smooth, but at the time, it was a new thing.
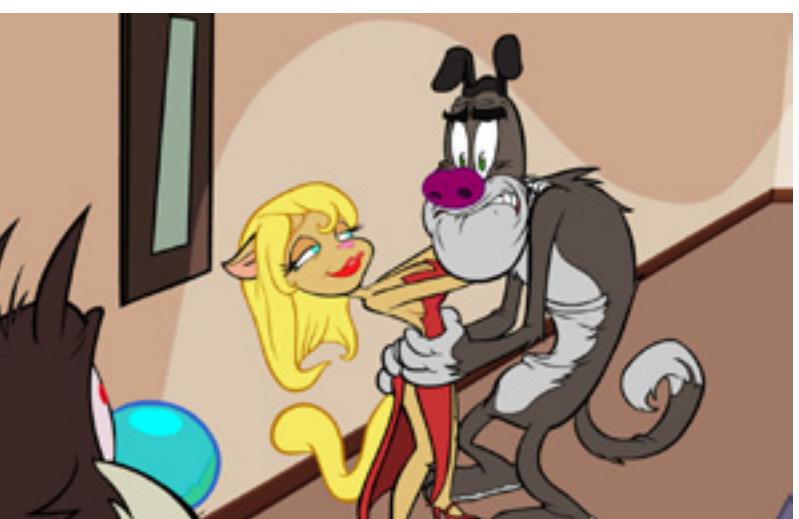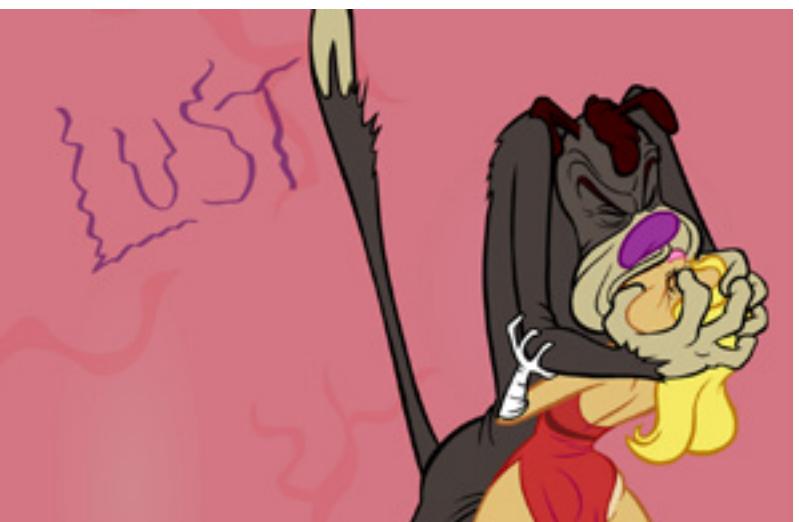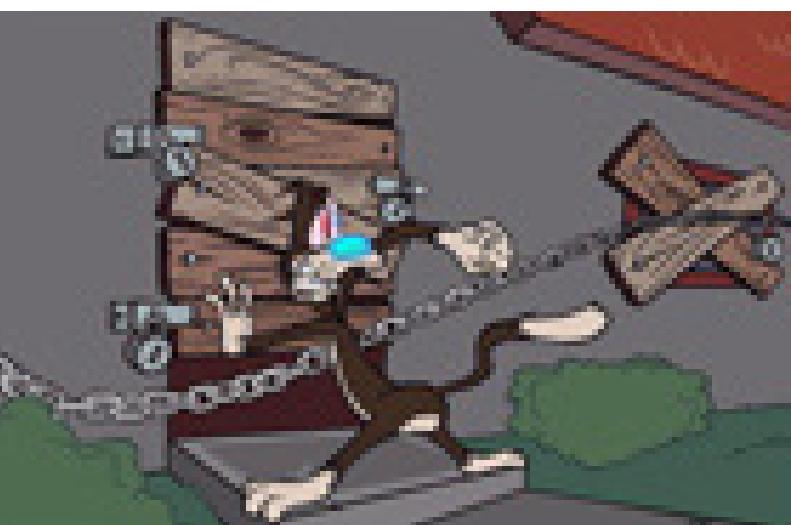
The Almost-Golden Age

If you watch the *Weekend Pussy Hunt* episodes in order, you can see how fast we progressed. The first couple episodes look like animatics (a preliminary version of an animated film with a series of drawings and voice-over), but they get not only smoother with each episode, but more elaborate in every way. By the end, we were really on a roll and I again imagined a new Golden Age of animation. But then, the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, and that spelled the end of Flash cartoon networks.

We had a lot of imitators at the time, and I think they contributed to the crash. Every big corporation was trying to start its own on-line cartoon network, and they were pumping in millions of dollars more than we were spending. One famous big studio spent seven million dollars, did a ton of marketing, and never produced a single cartoon! Their office was located directly underneath our studio too. They crashed first, and the media made big news out of it. Everyone assumed that if they couldn't make this idea work, no one could. Shortly after, Icebox's investors pulled out and that was the end of all our progress along with most of my crew.

Right around that time, I was starting work on The Ripping Friends as a co-production between Fox Kids and the Canadian network Teletoon. I gave up on Flash for a while. I was sick of it. When I turned around, there was a show done in Flash airing on television. I couldn't believe it! I had only been using Flash because it was a cheap and easy way to make cartoons that appeared in a tiny window on-line. I never imagined anyone using it for TV. Instead of drawing the whole cartoon traditionally, they created a handful of simplistic character poses and moved them around like puppets. The crew that I trained on Weekend Pussy Hunt was now doing entire TV series, and becoming directors and producers overnight.

Today, nearly everything on television is done in Flash (or Flash-imitation programs). They have so simplified the techniques that it all looks like cut-outs sliding around a flat environment, with lots of fancy After Effects tricks to hide the fact that there is no actual animation or unique drawings. It's completely obvious that it is Flash. My whole time using Flash I was desperately trying to make it not look like Flash. I would never have predicted that tweening (the automated animation feature in Flash) would become the dominant style of mainstream animation.

Hanna-Barbera Revisited

When Fred Seibert was named president of Hanna-Barbera Cartoons in the early 1990s, he hired me as a consultant. His first question to me was, "Why are old cartoons so great and the new ones aren't?" I explained the history of cartoons to him, and pointed out that the classic cartoons—*Bugs Bunny*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Popeye*, and many others—began life as short cartoons, not as thirteen half-hour episodes of a Saturday-morning series. In the past, cartoon directors constantly experimented with new characters in shorts and when certain characters clicked with the audiences, they would make more cartoons with their newfound stars.

Fred said, "Then I'm going to make shorts from now on at Hanna-Barbera and see what characters click." This was the smartest thing I had ever heard from an executive. It was actually a practical idea that could bring back progress and competition. It led to *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Cow and Chicken*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Ed Edd n Eddy*, and many other popular Cartoon Network series. Soon, all the other studios followed with their own shorts departments.

While I was consulting for Fred, I showed him some of my caricatured sketches of Hanna-Barbera characters. He liked them and suggested I do some animated cartoons in that style. It was like a dream come true because I had been doing my own versions of Hanna-Barbera characters since I was a kid. It was hard to believe that the studio would actually encourage me to animate their characters this way.

Now we had to decide which character to focus on. I always liked some of the secondary characters, like Ranger Smith. Smith is a strict disciplinarian

Hanna-Barbera doodles, early 1990s.

who believes that rules should guide your whole life, especially arbitrary rules. I could identify with this because my whole life had been about floating around the rules and getting into trouble with authority figures. It's ironic that I admire authority figures as entertainment characters, yet I have a tendency to make the real ones mad, often without even trying.

Fred gave Spümcø a deal to make three Ranger Smith shorts, each about six minutes in length.
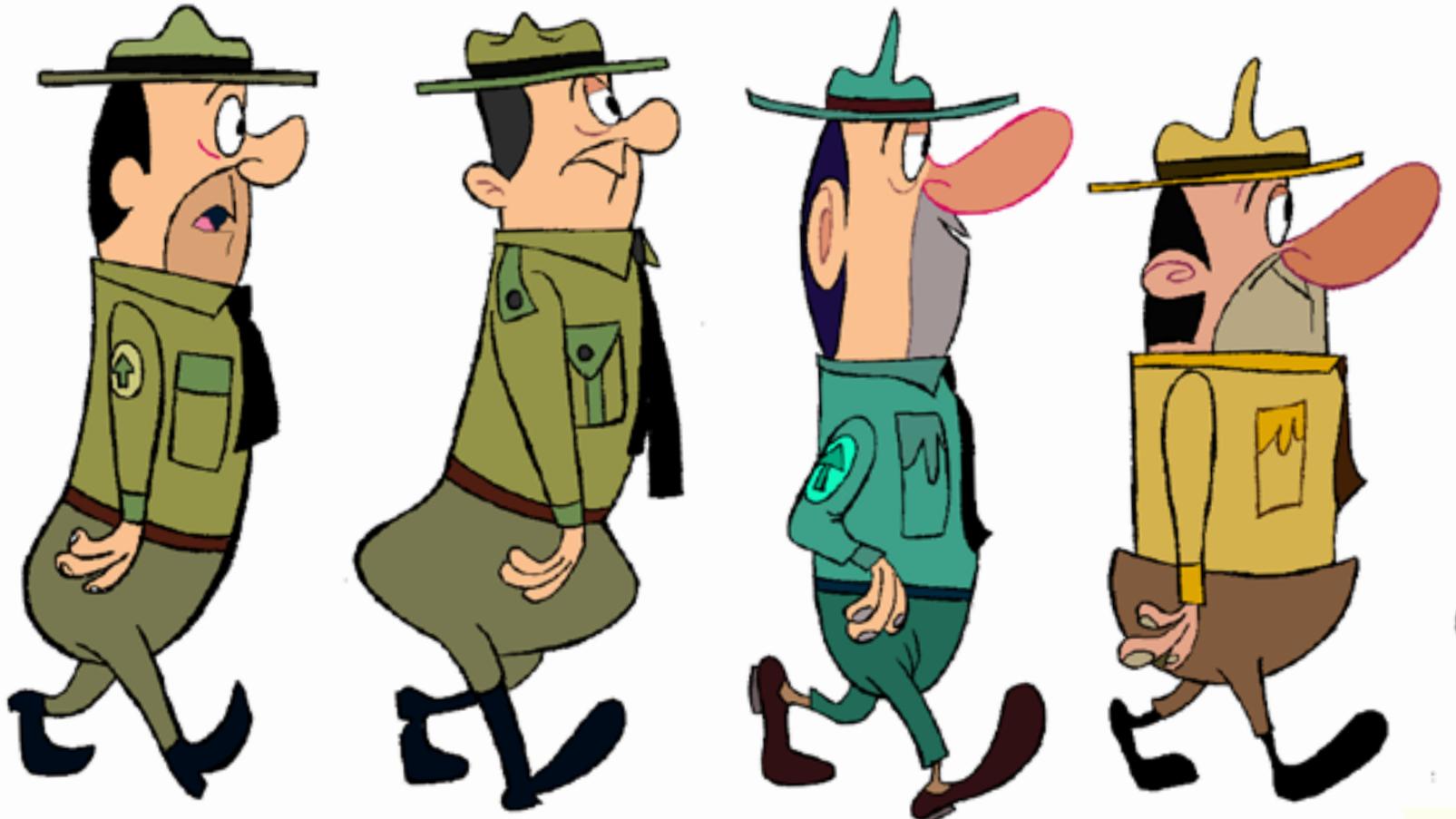
Day In the Life of Ranger Smith

This was my practice short. I wanted to make these Hanna-Barbera cartoons in a different style than *The Ren and Stimpy Show*. My goal was to take the limited animation techniques that Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera had pioneered in the 1950s and make fun of them, make them part of the entertainment. One thing I had always thought was funny about the early Hanna-Barbera cartoons was the way the animators created limited sequences of frames representing a walk movement, called walk cycles. There were a hundred variations on this basic concept.

I remember animator Carlo Vinci's scenes of Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble walking down the street. Fred's head would remain still or "held," while his body moved up and down. Barney would be doing the opposite: His head would be bobbing up and down while his body remained held. Underneath their animal-skin dresses, their legs would repeat in a cycle using a mere

eight drawings over and over. I imagined that the animators got bored doing limited animation, and to amuse themselves would create all these variations of cheap animation techniques.

Another funny thing about the earliest Hanna-Barbera cartoons is that the characters looked different in every cartoon, and no one more so than Ranger Smith. I decided to combine these two Hanna-Barbera traditions into one funny scene where Ranger Smith was walking through the woods as different trees panned by in front, obscuring him for a step or two. Each time he reappeared from behind the tree his design would be different, and he would have a different walk cycle. I worked with Ben Jones, a wonderful animator, to create a bunch of crazy walk cycles in limited animation—each one getting progressively stupider.

Artists

Among the artists who worked on the short was Aaron Springer who did some really funny and unique layouts. Erik Wiese, who, like Aaron, was a recent graduate of CalArts, also did some handsome layouts and background designs for the cartoon. One of the hardest things to imitate in the original Hanna-Barbera cartoons is the spongy background styles of painters Art Lozzi and Fernando Montealegre. You wouldn't think so because that whole style was created so that backgrounds could be painted at lightning speed. I had someone copy exactly a pan background of a forest scene from the short "Robin Hood Yogi" (1959), and we used this for a lot of the cartoon.

Aaron Springer's Ranger Smith
layouts, 1999.

Richard Daskas painted some
beautiful backgrounds for the
other scenes. They looked
more like traditional Spümcø
backgrounds (inspired by Golden
Books) than Hanna-Barbera
backgrounds.
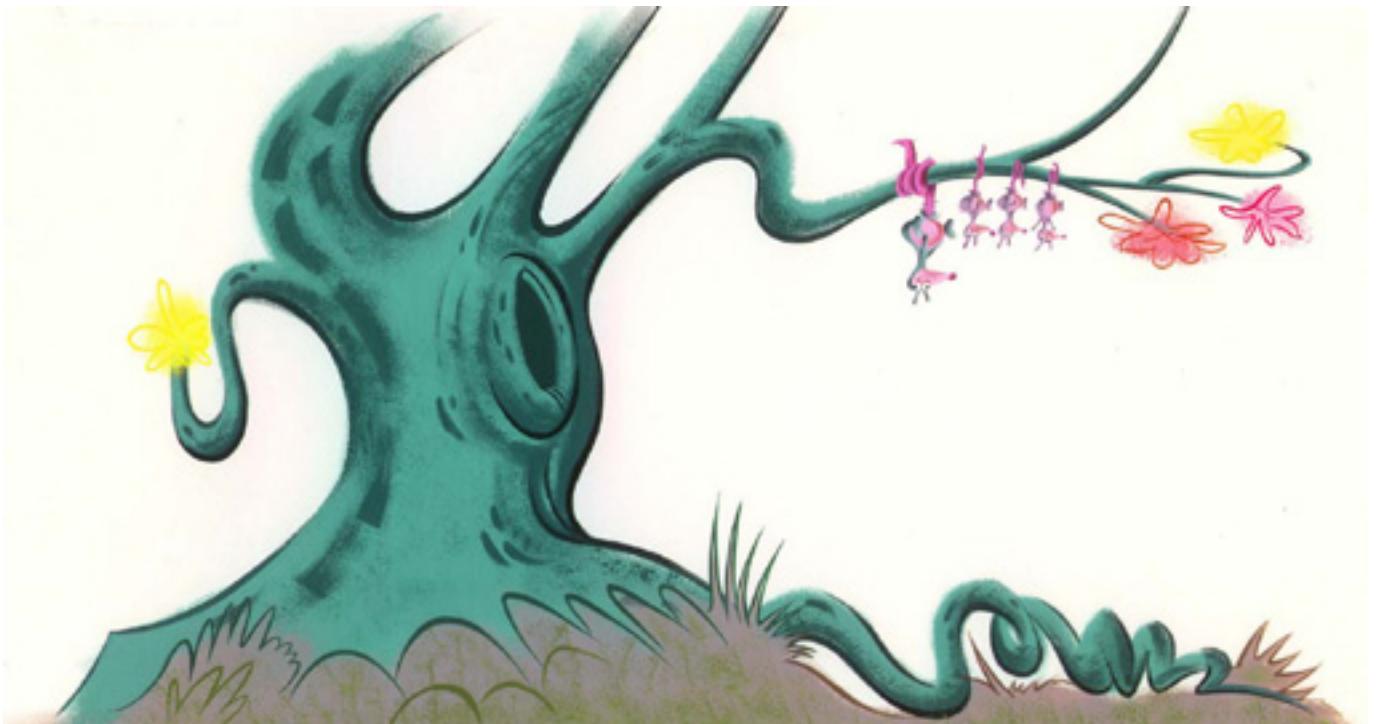
They made the cartoon look
good, but were not quite where
I wanted to end up with my
versions of Bill and Joe's TV style.

Boo Boo Runs Wild

The next cartoon, *Boo Boo Runs Wild*, was a funnier story than *A Day in the Life of Ranger Smith* (1999), and I wanted to take some steps forward in technique and give it some dramatic power, as well as to get the backgrounds to look more like Lozzi's.

Cover to *Animation World
Magazine*, 1999

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Boo Boo Runs Wild
title card and storyboard, 1999.
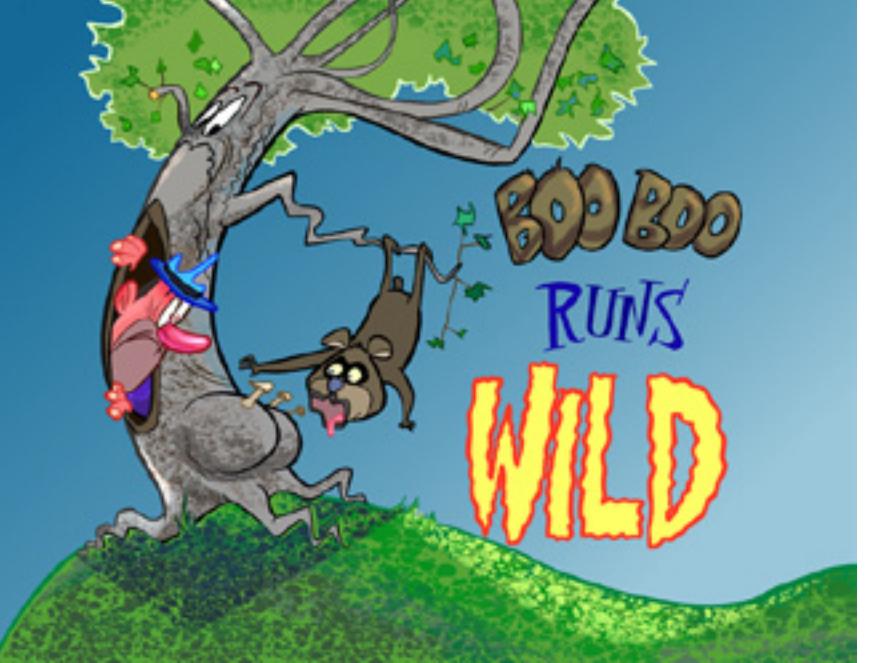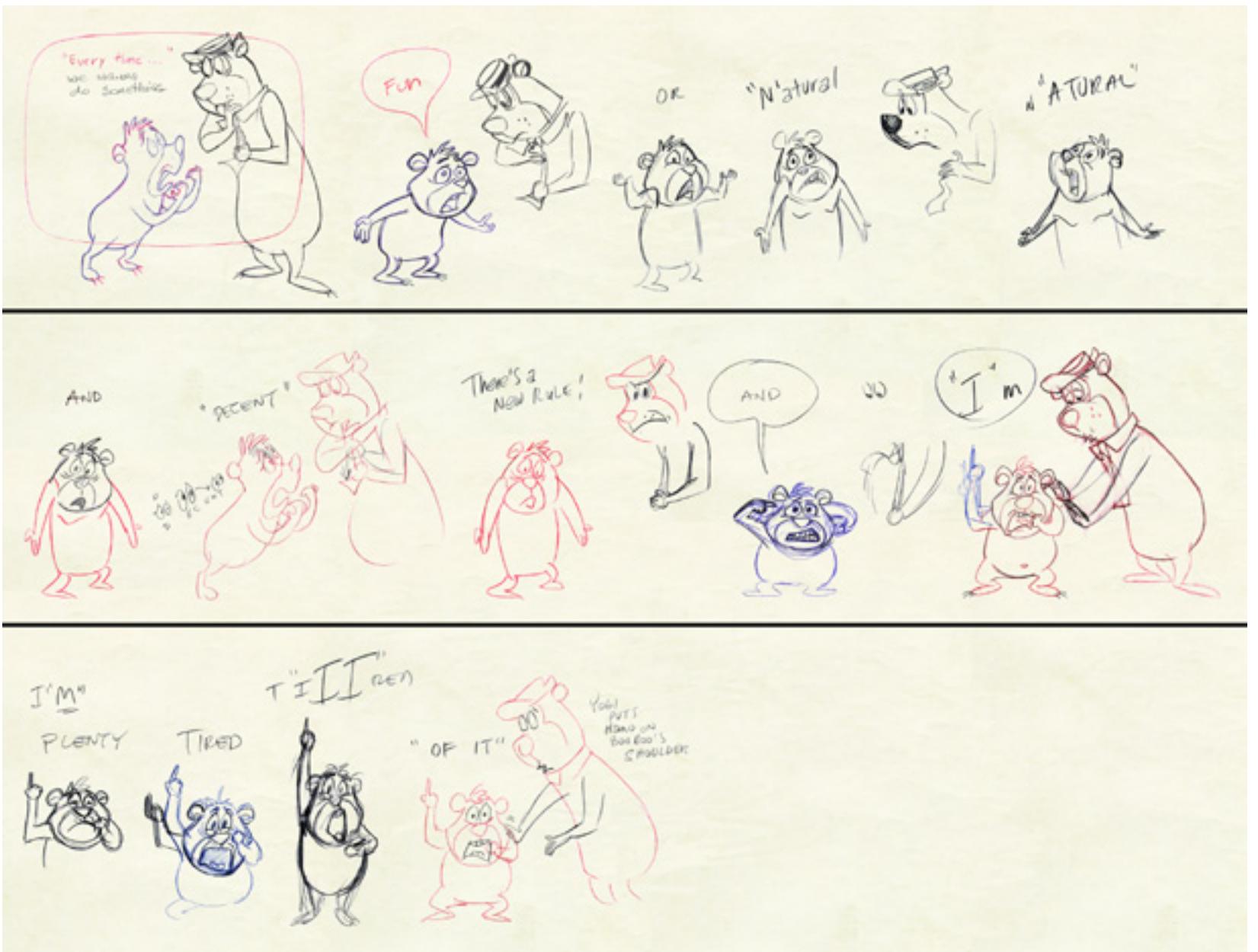
Backgrounds

I auditioned a lot of really talented background painters, and told them I wanted to start with the original Hanna-Barbera style and then to exaggerate it—in the mistaken belief that this would be a simple task. I guess it wasn't because they all gave up. Then, one day, a painter named Richard Ziehler-Martin came in, enthused and determined to make it happen. I gave him tons of references like frame grabs from the original cartoons and tapes of the cartoons themselves, and went over every detail of what I was looking for.

By this time, I was frustrated by the failure of everybody else to reproduce the style, and I didn't have much hope for success. Richard came back in a few days with a handful of backgrounds that were *exactly* what I had been looking for. From that moment on, each new background he did built upon the basic ideas and style of late 1950s Hanna-Barbera backgrounds. He did more and more elaborate scenes with subtle color combinations and extreme sponge control. He took what was supposed to be a quick, cheap technique and made it look spectacular.
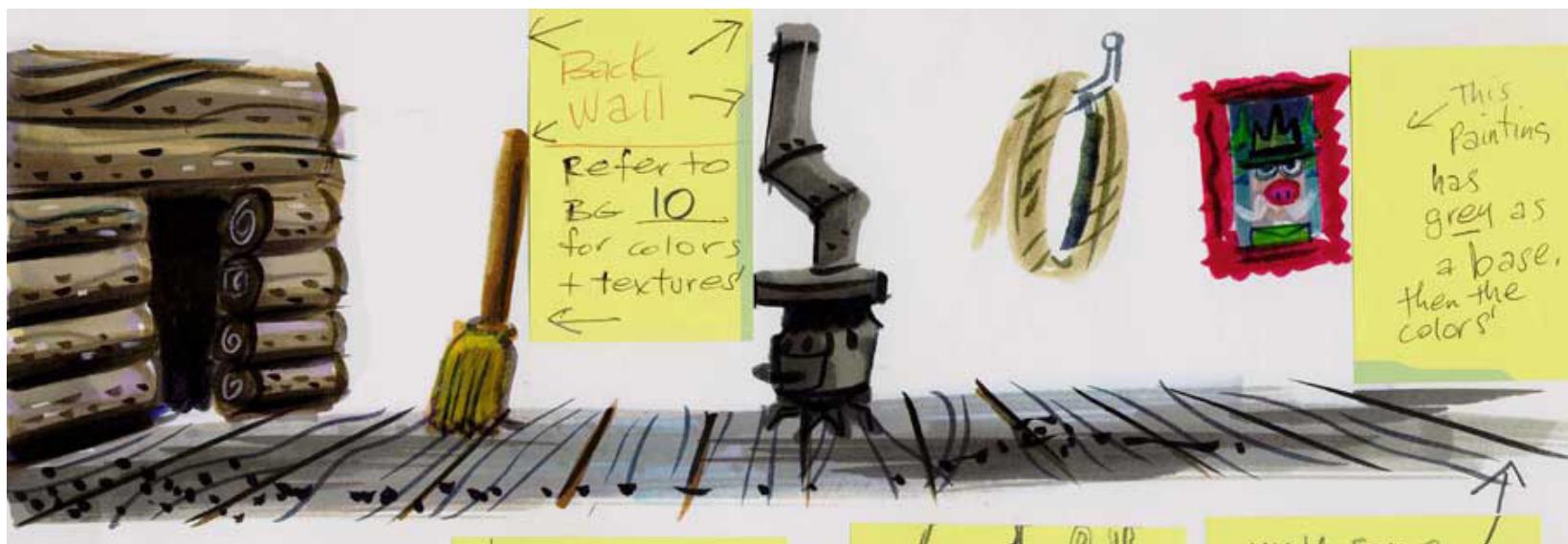
Often final cleanups of background paintings tend to lose some guts from the original layouts. Richard Ziehler-Martin helped solve that problem.

Richard Ziehler-Martin background art and final scene for *Boo Boo Runs Wild*, 1999.


We also experimented with Painter software to see if we could digitally reproduce a sponge style. The scenes at Cindy Bear's cave were done this way, and they look it.

Korean Studio

Across the street from Spümcø there was a Korean animation studio that wanted to work for us. Like all service studios, they promised to use my production system and do everything the way I wanted it done. Of course, they did the opposite and actually spent more money than they needed to spend. I showed them how limited animation worked and how they could "hold" one part of the body while just moving the arms or head. I did most of the layouts myself on the cartoon and wrote exactly how to set up each scene, when to hold a drawing, and when to move it.

There was a scene of Boo Boo standing there and waving his arm and moving his mouth that took the studio forever to animate. I went over there to see how such a simple scene could take so long to finish. Instead of separating the body parts of Boo Boo onto different animation levels and re-using a handful of arm drawings, like my layout instructions had indicated, they retraced the entire body (which was stationary) over and over again and created a stack of paper three inches thick. They were making more work for themselves while at the same time slowing down the production with needless waste.

From placemat concept to final layouts on *Boo Boo Runs Wild.*
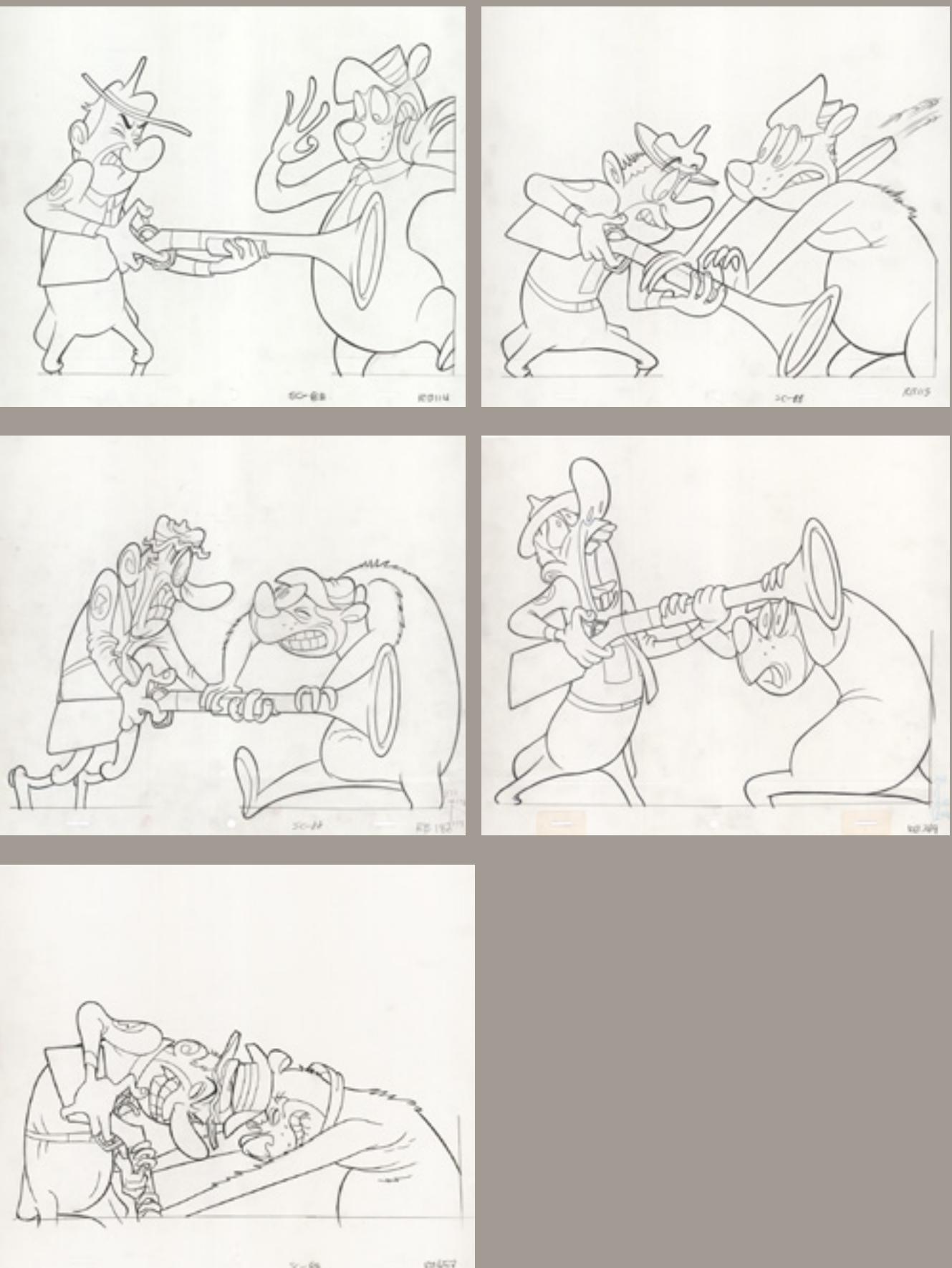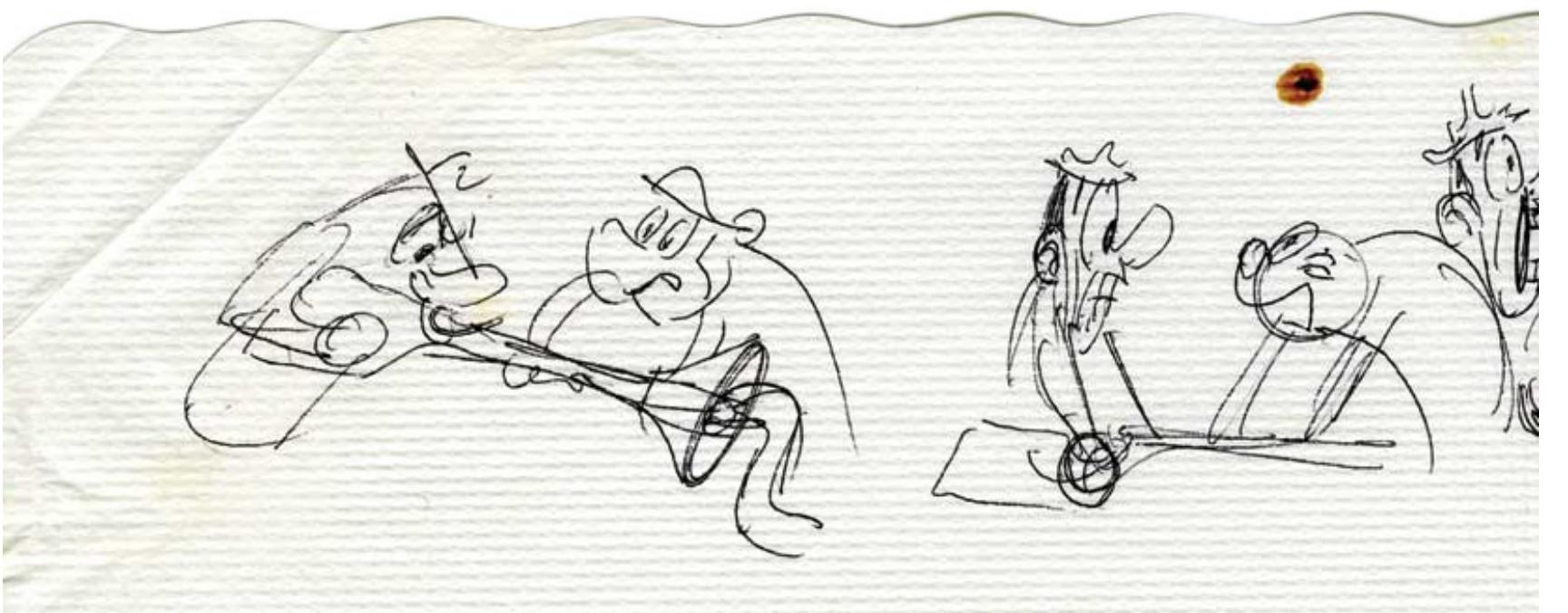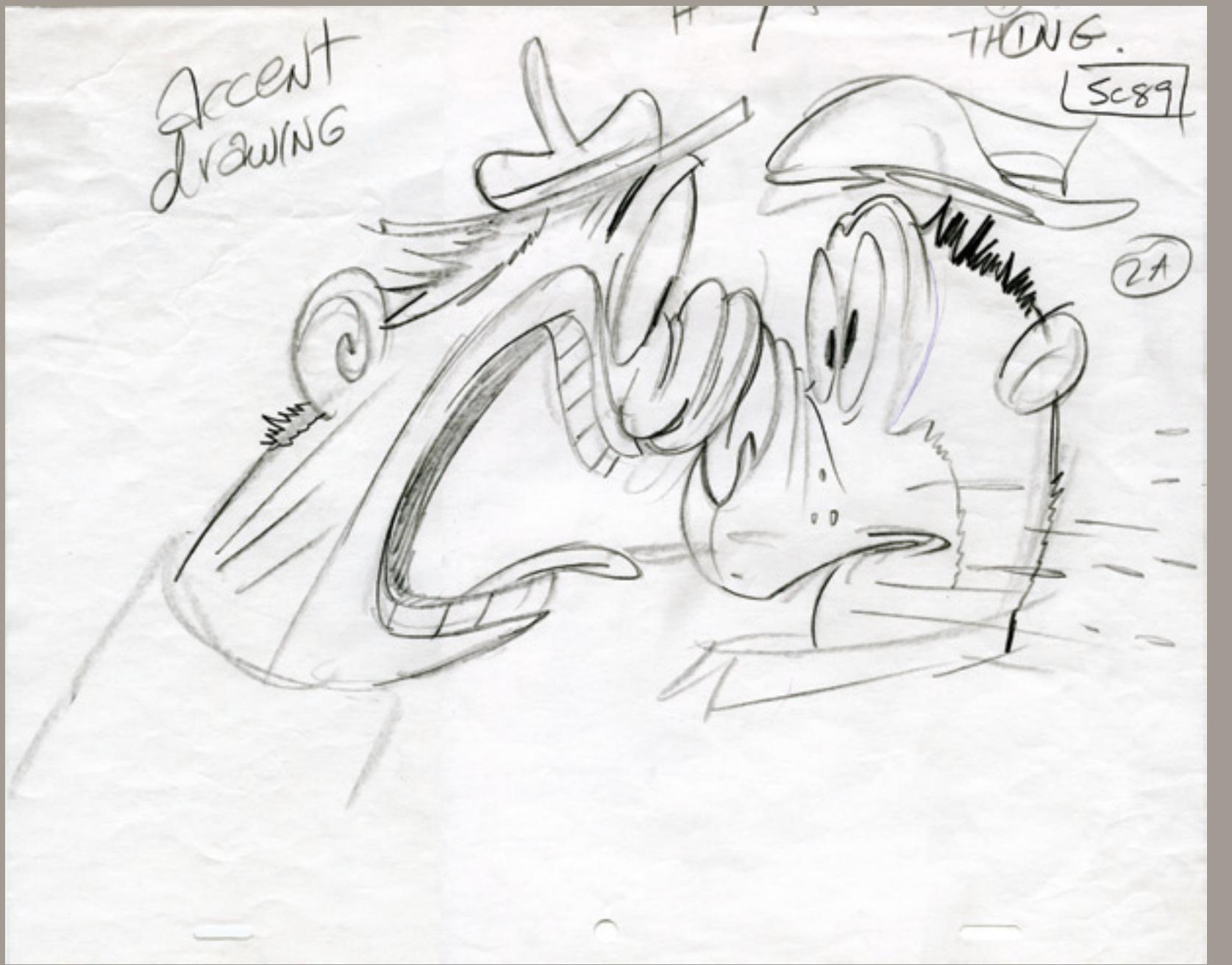
On the other hand, there was a small handful of animators who were dedicated to doing a great job and constantly came over to show me their work in progress and get input. One of them was Anthony Agrusa, who was very excited to be working on fun animation and absorbed every theory I had.

Using sophisticated limited-animation techniques and re-use of poses, he made some of my layout drawings look like full animation, like the close-ups of Ranger Smith yelling at Yogi, "I'm a Ranger, Yogi. First and foremost!"
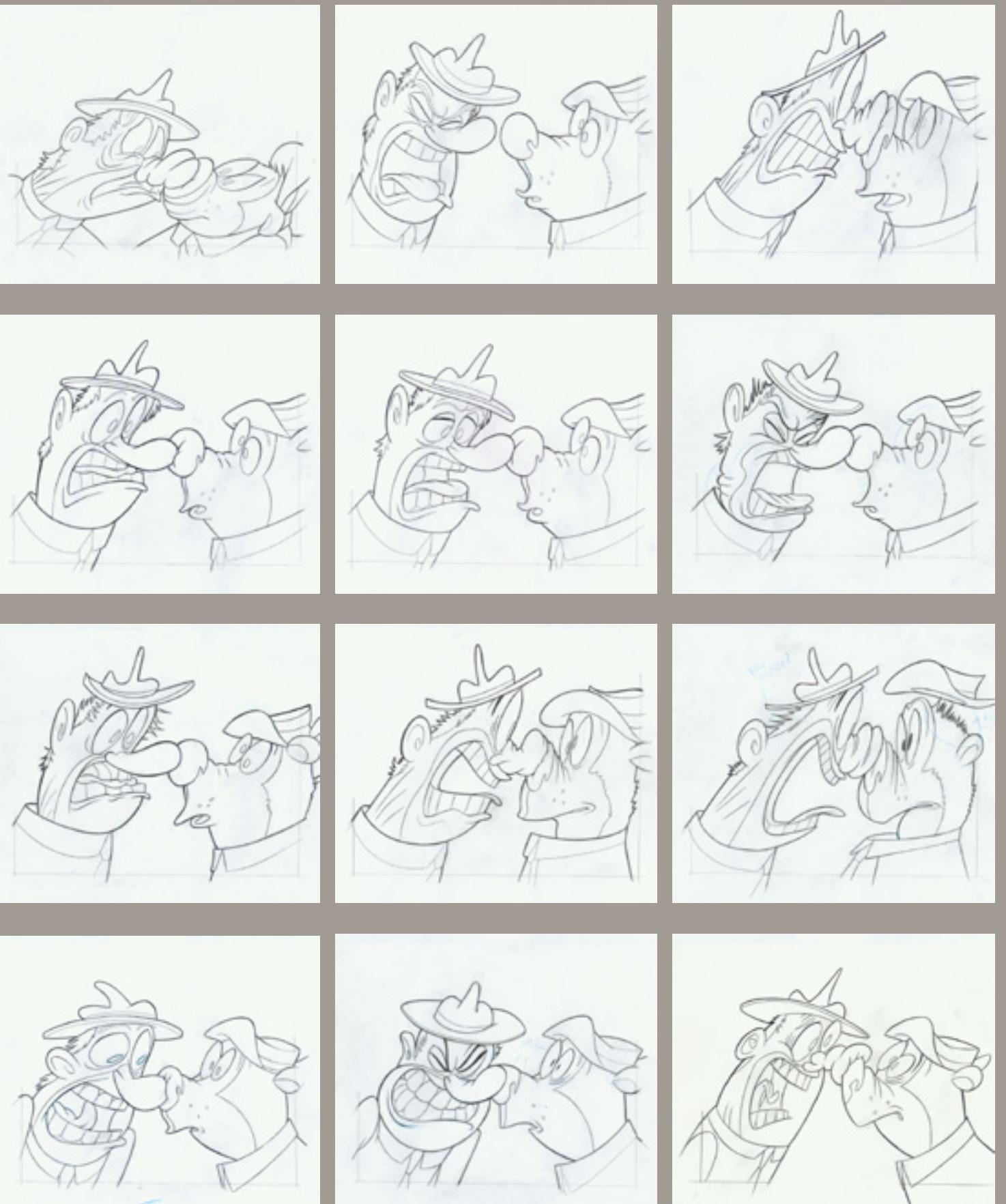
The Ranger Smith Beatdown

There was one scene in *Boo Boo Runs Wild* that made everyone nervous. I was a big fan of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), but at the time, it wasn't a big mainstream hit. Not everyone knew about Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu or "Ground and Pound."

Near the end of the cartoon, when Ranger Smith realizes it's his duty to shoot Boo Boo in the name of returning discipline to the forest, Yogi brains him with a lamp and they go crashing to the ground where they have a knock-down drag-out fight. Yogi ends up in Ranger Smith's "guard" with the Ranger's legs wrapped around Yogi. This is a standard defensive position in UFC, but to many who saw the scene, I was putting the two characters in the missionary position. I tried to explain it and prove that it was pure fighting, and that there was no subliminal meaning to the scene, but everyone just rolled their eyes. Anyway, from the guard position, Yogi ground and pounded Ranger Smith to a pulp, even headbutting him, which used to be common practice but is now illegal in UFC rules. When the cartoon first aired, this scene was cut down to a fragment of what we actually animated, which was too bad, because it was the climax (pardon the expression) of the cartoon.

Corey Burton did an amazing job voicing Ranger Smith. You can barely tell the difference between him and the Ranger's original voice, Don Messick, except for the more intense emotion of Corey's acting. Producer Steve Worth voiced Yogi and I did Boo Boo. When Boo Boo reverts to a feral bear, he stops talking in English and communicates in "grunt-speak." I had to practice this for a while, but eventually got the hang of making Boo Boo's emotions and meanings come across through inflection alone. That was a fun experiment.

The last Ranger Smith short was called *Ranger's Retreat*. Vincent Waller did a very funny storyboard for it. Unfortunately the cartoon never got made because *Boo Boo Runs Wild* ran long. *Ranger's Retreat* is an allegory that makes fun of the animation business, and modern hippie-style corporate practices in general. In the cartoon, the Rangers, who have trouble controlling natural wildlife, represent the frustrated TV executives who can't control the cartoonists, or, as they often refer to us, the "Creatives."
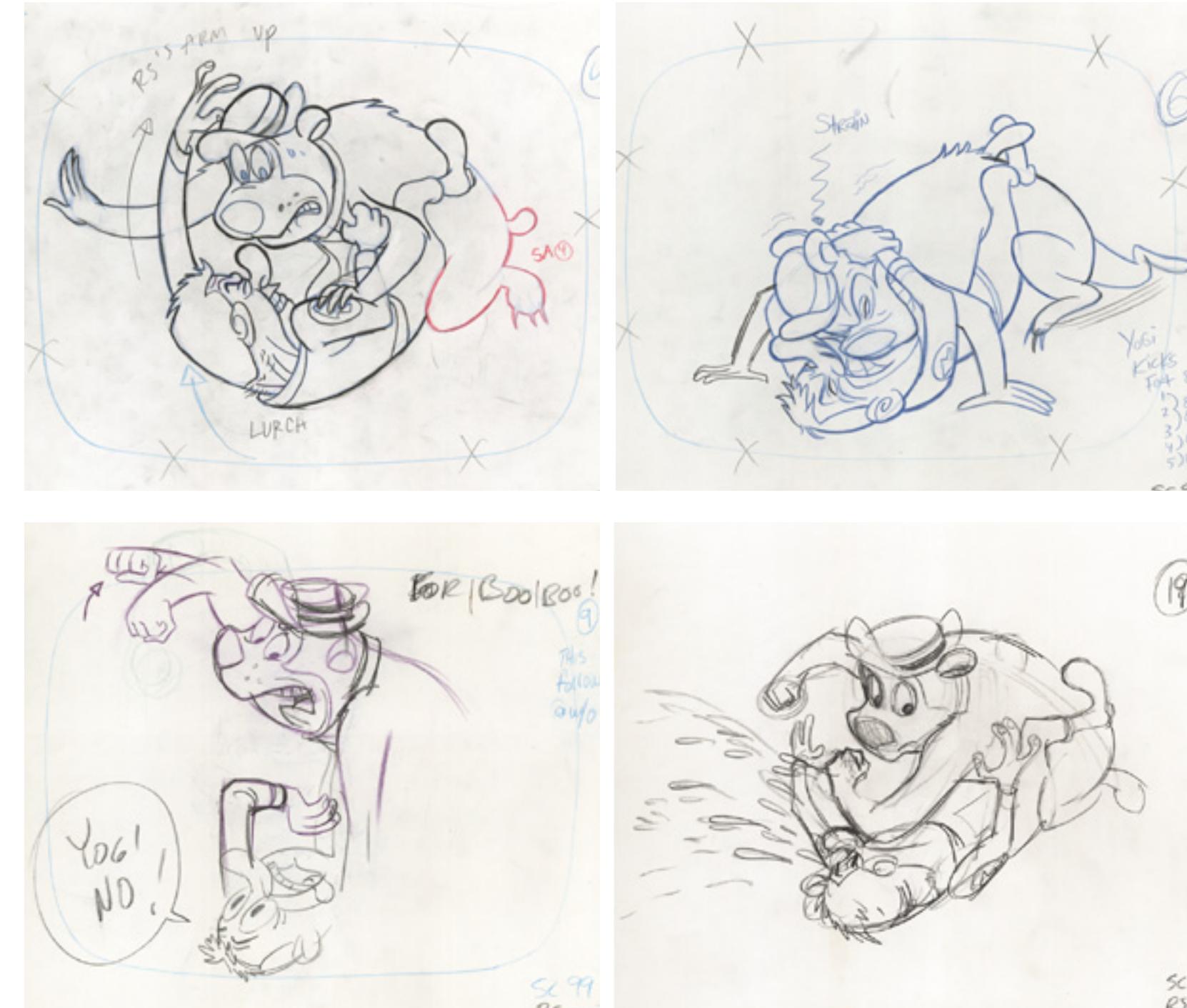
This page and following: The layouts, cleaned up animation drawings and final animation for Ranger Smith and Yogi's epic beatdown.

The Ripping Friends TV Production

Boring Execution

The execution of *The Ripping Friends* series, which debuted in 2001, didn't match the dream. The concept was filled with funny ideas and was designed in a difficult drawing style by Jim Smith and myself. When it was finally sold to television, we were confronted by too many obstacles—some unavoidable, some arbitrary waste.

I had almost forgotten about the project. In the late 1990s, years after I had created it, I was steeped in the excitement and problems of turning Internet cartoons and Flash into a viable business. I was making *Weekend Pussy Hunt* for Icebox and we had hired a huge staff that had to be trained in Flash in the midst of producing the online show.

Meanwhile, my producer Kevin Kolde had set up a complex deal to produce *The Ripping Friends* as a Canadian co-production. The show would air on Fox Kids in the United States and Teletoon in Canada. The budget was much lower than *Ren & Stimpy*, so the seeming solution was to do as much pre-production as we could afford in Los Angeles, and to subcontract the bulk of the production to animation studios in Canada, who in turn would send the animation to Korea.

We ended up having three studios involved, which meant I would have to get them all to agree to use my production system. I knew from past experience all the problems that this would present, but figured my own kind, the Canadians, who were all fans of Ren and Stimpy, would be eager to use my more creative and fun system to achieve similar results. Two Canadian studios agreed to do the show and to use my system, which meant:

– Timing everything to beats

– Laying out the show, while preserving the guts of the storyboards and not toning them down

– Using the backgrounds and layouts Jim Smith and John Dorman drew in LA

Network: "Can we have more diversity among the Ripping Friends?"

Two Networks = Double the Notes

Having two networks involved presented more problems; it meant we'd have double the amount of notes. One network would OK certain gags but censor others, and then the other network would censor the gags that the first network had approved.

Jim Smith was doing spectacular
pre-production work on the
show. He drew funny gags, like
the He-Mom punishment scene
on the previous page, and the
monolithic, futuristic backgrounds
of Ripcot, the home base of
the Ripping Friends, and other
environments. He also drew funny
and exciting storyboards.

Corporate Punishment

Many of the core elements of *The Ripping Friends*—
the parts of my pitch that sold the show—had to go.
We couldn't do much funny cartoon violence, which
in the original concept, is how the Ripping Friends
would always solve their problems. They had a mother,
He-Mom, who would discipline them with her frying
pans when they were disobedient. We wrote this gag
into one of the early stories and got a note back from the
Standards and Practices department at Fox that said that
we couldn't show child abuse in our cartoons because
abused children would be forever scarred by these
scenes that reminded them of their own experiences.
You have to remember now that the Ripping Friends are
not really children, even though they act like it. They are
all thirty-six years old—huge, muscular beasts who live

for the delights of pain. They fight for a living. He-Mom
is one-third their size. When she throws them over her
knee and paddles their butts with a huge frying pan,
the whole thing is so ridiculous that we couldn't believe
anyone would have a problem with it. Not even a network
censor. We tried to point out the absurdity of the humor,
but lost this and many other logical arguments. As a
result of so many crazy notes, we had to write around
many of the inherent premises of the show.

I was not as involved in the first few stories as I
should have been because I was working to finish up
the Internet cartoons. Richard Pursel was writing the
outlines, and there was lots of funny stuff in them.
I spent some time working on them creatively, but much
more time trying to get the networks to sign off on them.

Layouts by John Dorman, 2000.
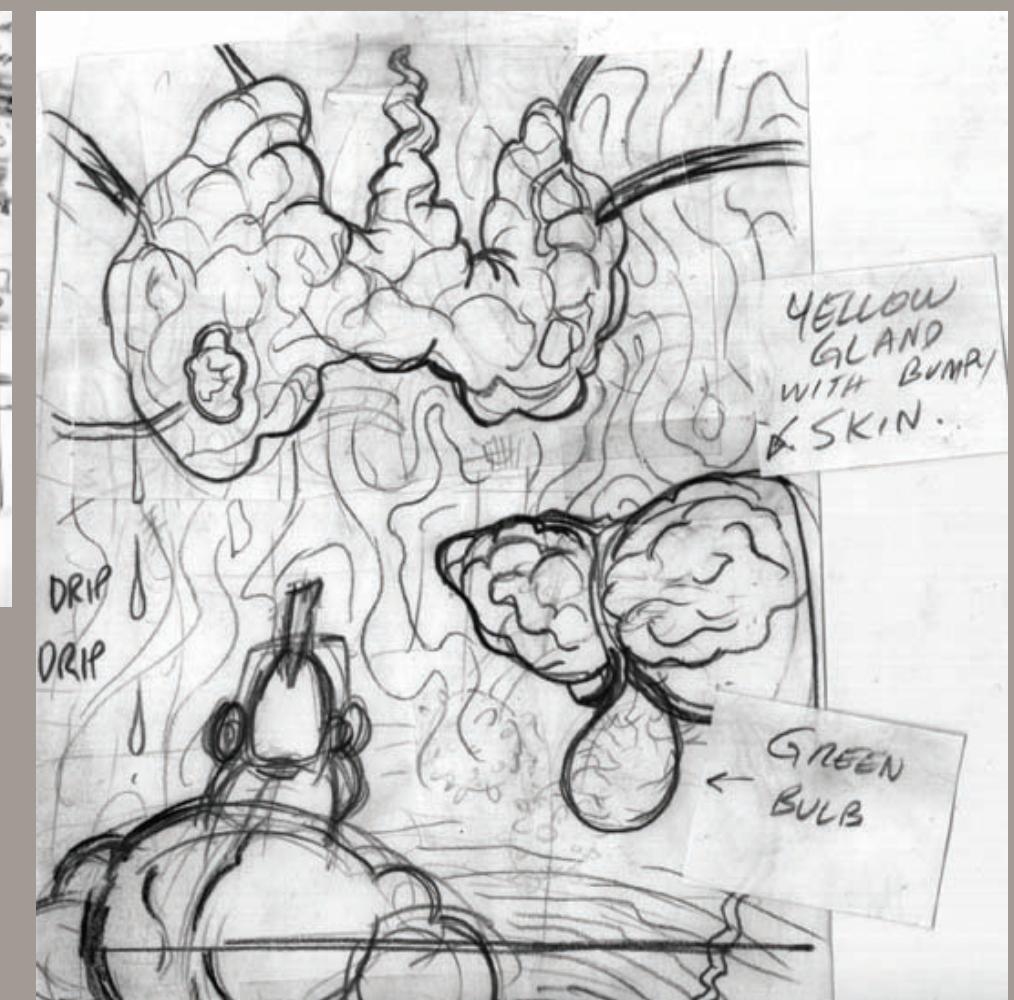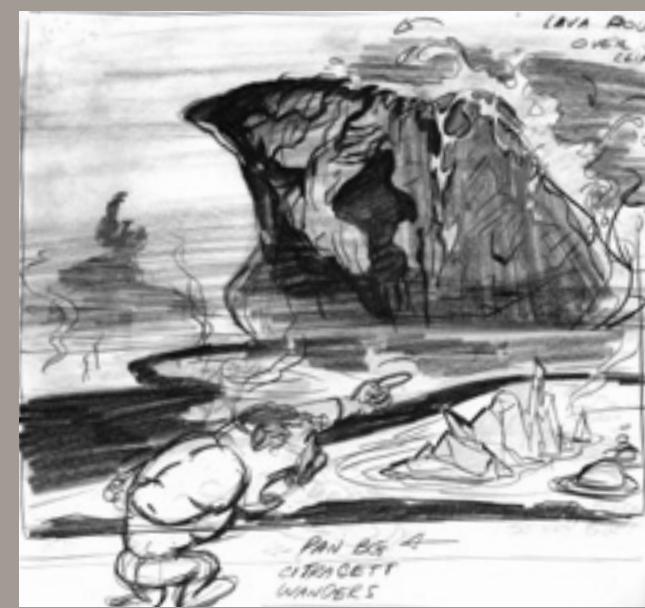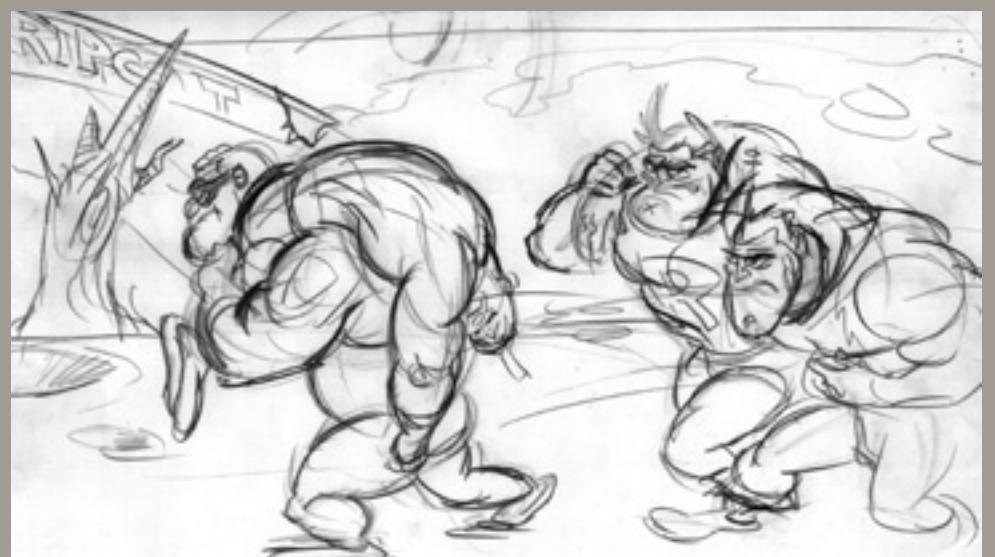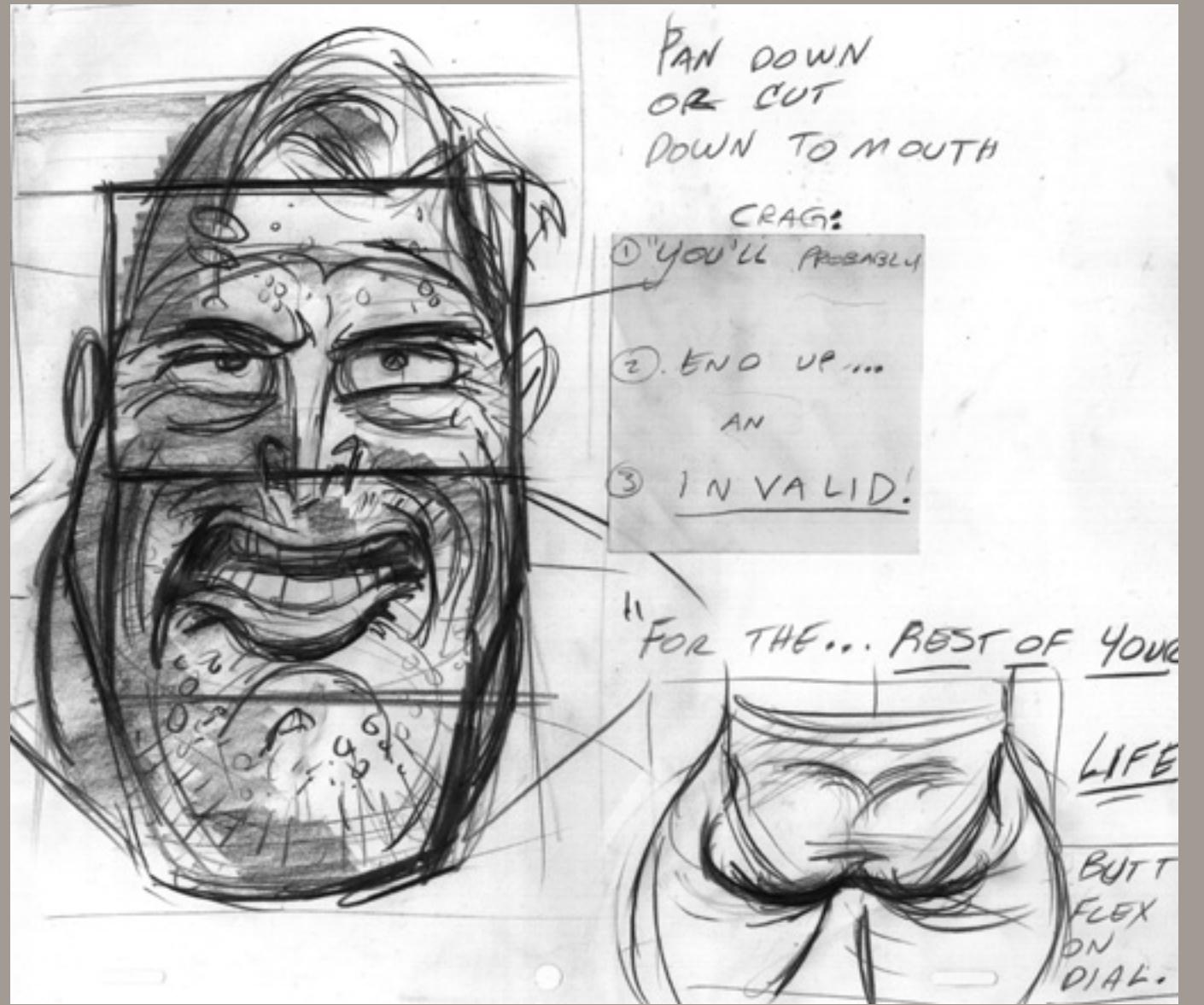
I also hired another great cartoonist and draftsman to help with the pre-production: John Dorman. He's a versatile cartoonist who can draw super-realistic or cartoony, and *The Ripping Friends* is a combination of the two genres. John had headed the development department at Ruby-Spears. He had hired greats like Jack Kirby, Gil Kane, and Doug Wildey, and he'd obviously absorbed a lot from them. Animator Ben Jones was also helping out with storyboards and layouts.

When the Internet boom imploded in 2000, *Weekend Pussy Hunt* went with it, and now I had more time to spend on *The Ripping Friends*. By this time, it was starting to become apparent that all the work that Jim and John had been doing was being toned down or completely ignored by the Canadian Studios.

I went up to Canada and found the artists were throwing out the drawings we did in Los Angeles and redoing them in a weak, limp drawing style. They also

weren't timing anything to beats. I patiently explained again exactly what the process was that we had all agreed to. I sat down with layout artists and showed them how to push the poses and expressions in the storyboards and got the producers and directors to promise again that they would follow my system.

I came back to LA to work with the guys at Spümcø, and we started taking key scenes and doing more layouts ourselves. Then we sent them to Canada and told the producers to put them in the scene folders and ship them as-is to Korea.

I asked them to copy all the layouts they did, put them in binders, and send them to us, so I could be sure they were using our drawings and following my process. When the first binders came in we couldn't find a single drawing that Jim Smith, John Dorman or I had done. They had all been redrawn.

I then decided to make manuals that showed exactly how to do what I wanted. I took some of Jim's rough layouts, had them cleaned up beautifully at Spümcø, and sent a manual up to Canada. The director at the Ottawa studio called me when he got it. "Wow, John, you actually want us to use your drawings!" he said. I could tell he thought I was crazy. I said I'd been telling him that since the beginning of production. He said, "Yeah but I thought you meant to use them to give us an idea, not that you literally wanted us to use the drawings themselves." I asked why he would want to change our drawings in the first place. He said they couldn't use our drawings because they were "off-model." He thought that the designers of the show—Jim and myself—couldn't draw our own characters.

Pages from *The Ripping Friends* style manual, 2000.

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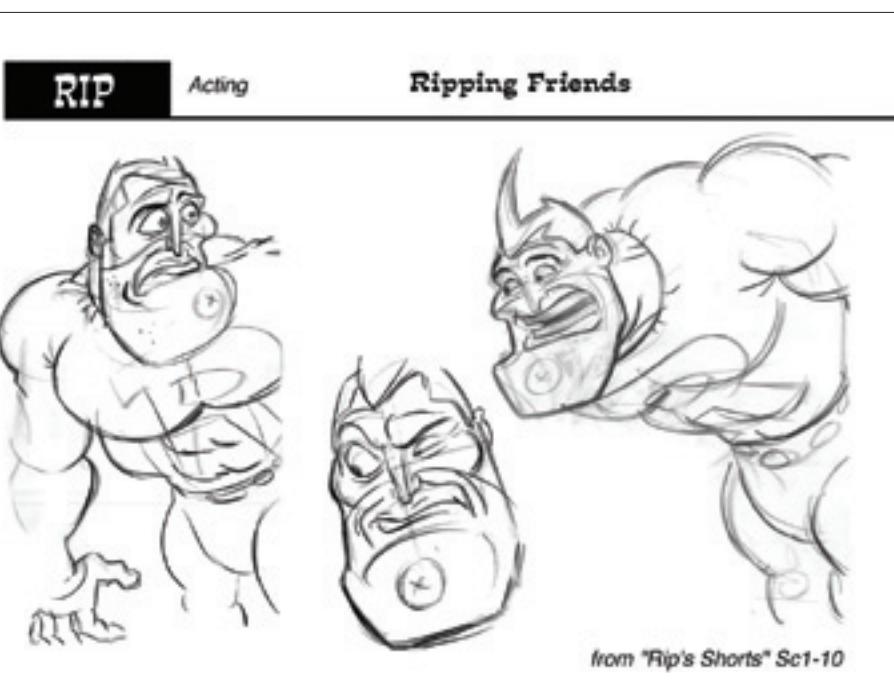
Miscellaneous drawings for
The Ripping Friends, 2000.

With that I packed up and moved to Ottawa myself to supervise the rest of the production in the studio. I soon found out what the problem was. It wasn't that the artists themselves were purposely not following instructions—it was that they never received any of them. I found a pile of my manuals stacked away on a shelf in the production manager's office.

I started working directly with the artists and handing out scenes to them. The younger ones were all eager to work my way while the older guys were set in their traditional methods. So I gave the majority of the work to a handful of the artists who wanted the show to be fun. This is where I met many of the artists that would later make *Ren and Stimpy: Adult Party Cartoon* with me.
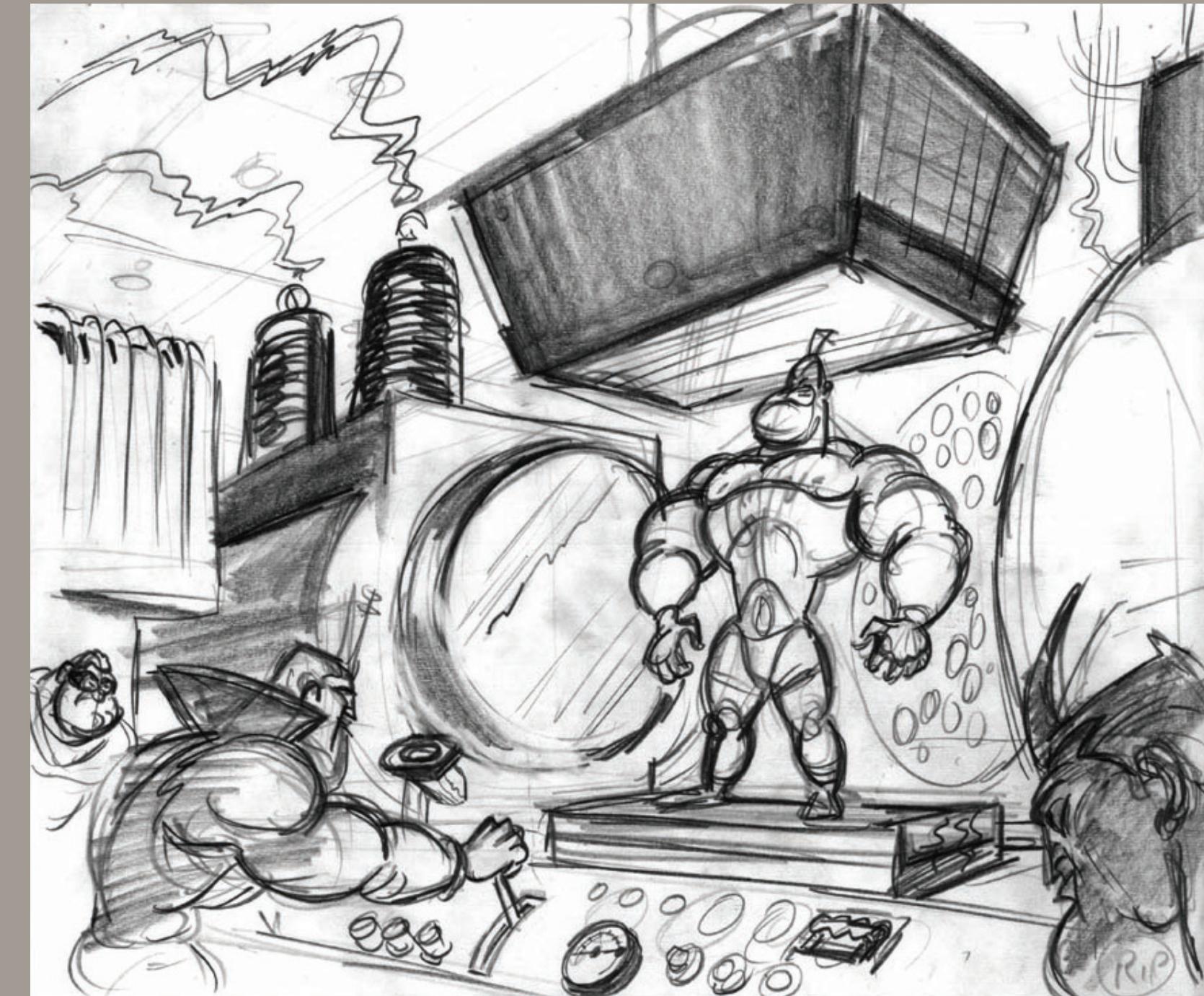
My painting for the *Adult Party Cartoon DVD collection, Ren & Stimpy: The Lost Episodes*, 2006.

Ren & Stimpy Adult Party Cartoon

It was *Ren & Stimpy* for adults. Well, not really. Kevin Kay and Albie Hecht of TNN asked me to make new episodes of Ren and Stimpy for primetime in 2002. "It can't be like the originals though, it has to be more adult," they told me. "You have to add something new and more edgy." I think this was because *South Park* and *Family Guy* were popular at the time. Those shows seemed to have no boundaries in taste, and were always trying to top each other in vulgarity and shock value—and anger. I didn't want to do anything different than what I had always done. I wanted to make funny cartoons about funny characters, but TNN was insistent that I should purposely add something more current and edgy.

I thought about it and decided to use episodes written for the first two seasons and add a bit of cursing and turn up the volume on some of the already "edgy" stuff that was in the original series. I figured no matter what I did, it wouldn't go anywhere near the boundaries that these other shows eagerly crossed on a regular basis.

I retitled the show *Ren and Stimpy: Adult Party Cartoon* based on some corny old records one of my gagmen, Mike Kerr, had. Some people loved it; a few hated it. Looking back, I should have fought to continue creatively exactly where I had left off in 1992. As it was, I only "changed" a small percentage of what we had been doing ten years earlier.

Despite the over-the-top gay and poo jokes and the odd cursing that makes me wince even now, there was a lot of innovation and fun in the new episodes. I also got to work with some of the original crew of the Nickelodeon series and a lot of new young artists who grew up watching and being influenced by the original series.

Adult Party Cartoon got off to a rough start, but gained momentum as the artists got used to the characters. The show needed another season to smooth out and find its way. Unfortunately, we didn't get it. Here are some highlights.

Stimpy smoking layouts by Jim Smith, 2002.

"Onward and Upward", 2004, was the practice episode for the new crew.

Vincent Waller came up with this story in 1991, in response to fan letters urging us to make a super gross-out episode for them. We pitched it to Vanessa Coffey, and it was too much for her. A decade later, we answered the call of our fans and put it into production.

The premise was that Ren and Stimpy lived in a bum's mouth, and wanted to move up in the world and live "The High Life." Ren steals Stimpy's savings and they move uptown to live in a spittoon, which compared to where they were living before, is high class.
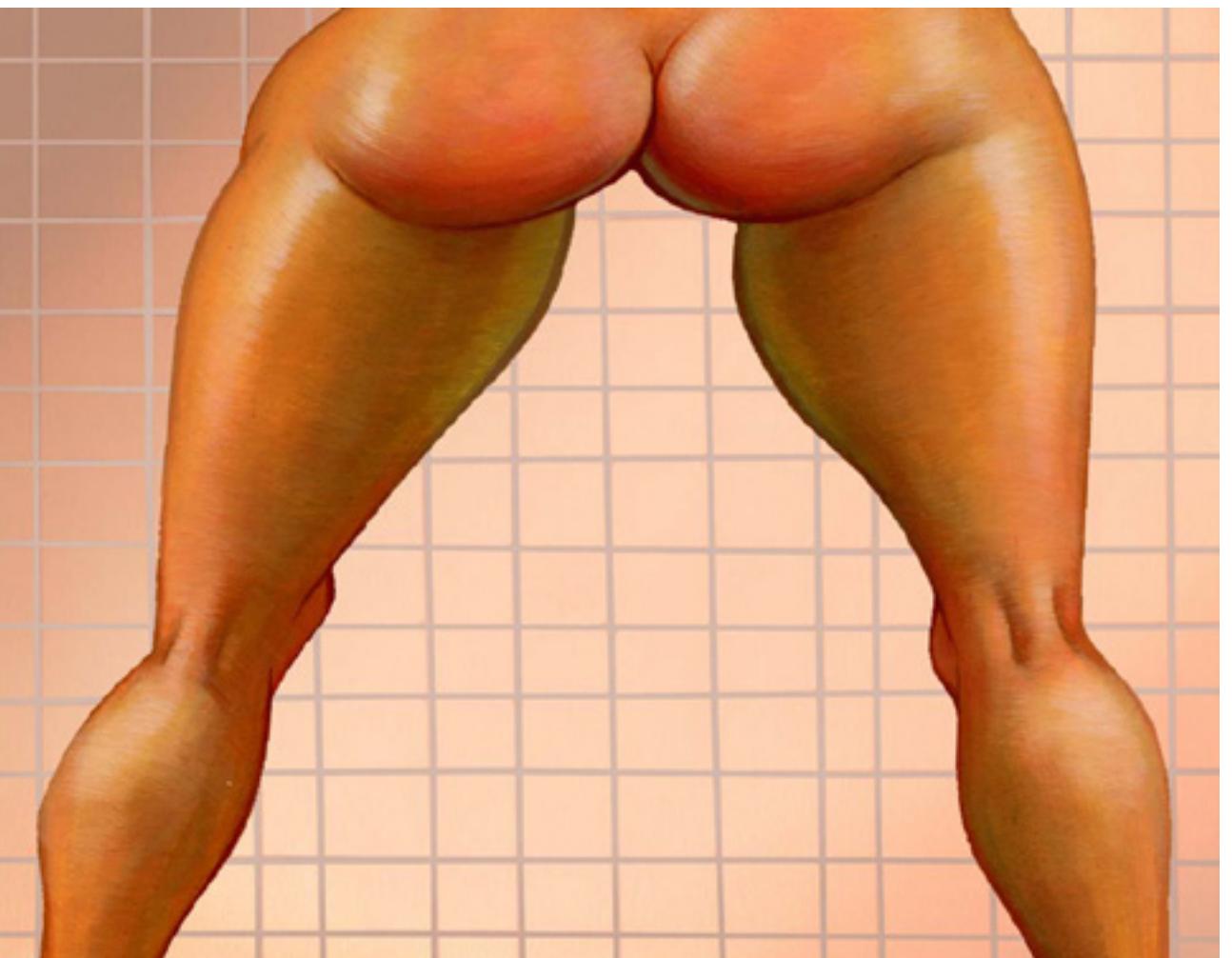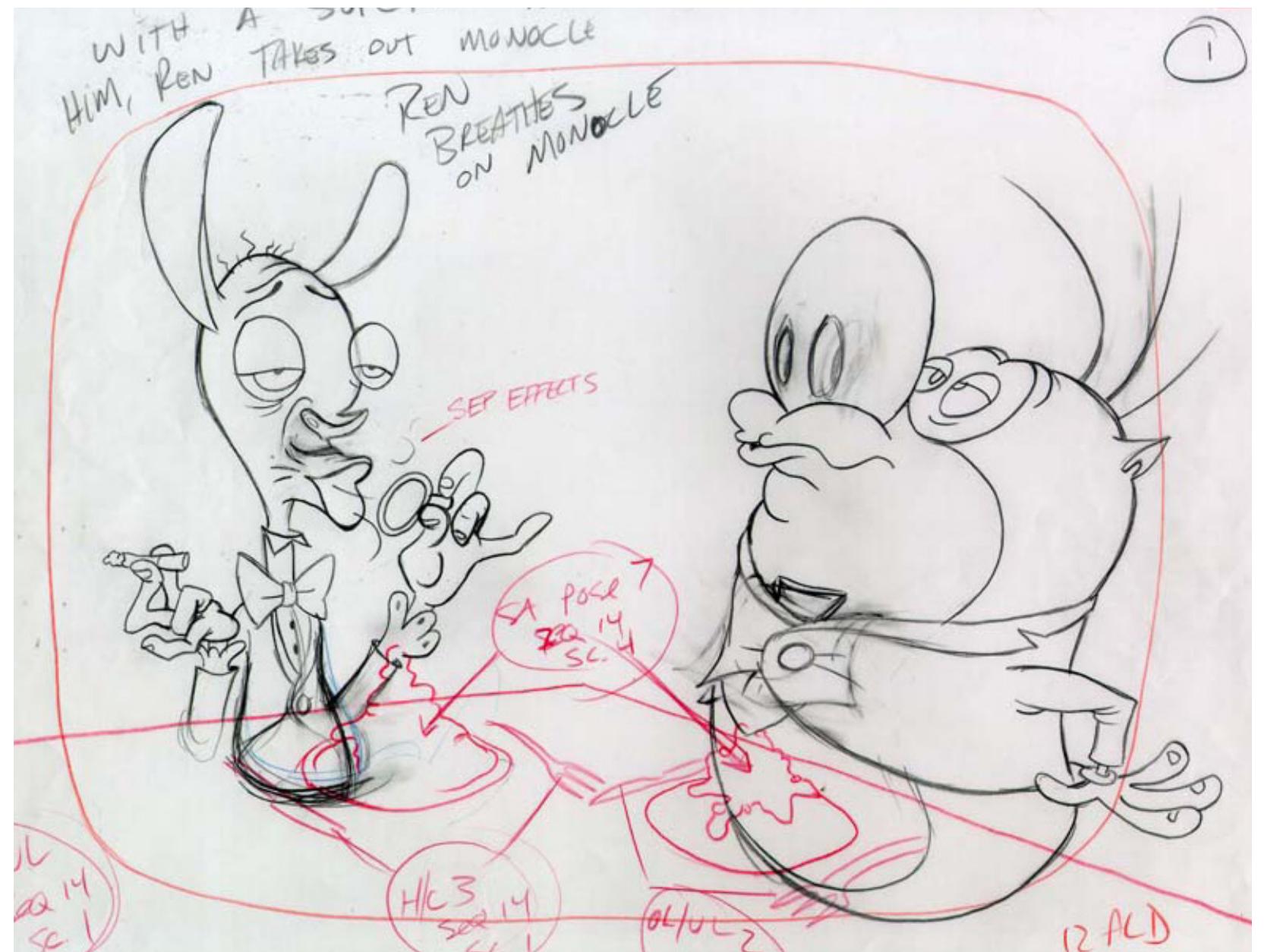
The premise of "Naked Beach Frenzy", 2004, came from a fan who proposed we make a beach cartoon where Ren ogles scantily clad girls and Stimpy gets jealous. There are some really beautiful scenes of girls changing in the beach locker room drawn by Katie Rice and sensitively animated by the Carbunkle crew.

"Fire Dogs II", 2004, was also written at the end of the first season of *Ren & Stimpy*. In the original "Fire Dogs," I loosely based the character of the fire chief on Ralph Bakshi. After the cartoon became popular, I thought it would be fun to do a sequel and actually make the fire chief metamorphose into the real Ralph Bakshi. We wrote scenes into the cartoon based on actual events that I and other cartoonists had witnessed from our adventures with Ralph. After I finished the storyboard I called Ralph and asked him to do the voice playing himself.

I pitched the story to him in my office, and he thought it was hilarious. As he was reading from the script at the recording, he kept stopping in mid-sentence to stare at me and say things like, "You really studied me, didn't you Johnny?" Then he'd punch me.

Technically, "Ren Seeks Help", 2004, was the best episode of the series. We wrote the outline during the second season of the original *Ren & Stimpy*. Nickelodeon produced their version of the story and changed the title to "Ren Needs Help." Many of the boyhood scenes are based on my own youth, only I never tortured animals. But I had witnessed other boys doing it, and would swear at them or try to scare away the animals before the mean boys could get to them.

I based Ren's dad partly on my own dad, and partly his, my Ukrainian grandfather who was an Orthodox priest. My dad did a really funny voice for the character and yelled at me for not giving him enough lines. He loved that microphone! I guess being a ham runs in the family.

There's a scene where Ren's parents are sitting on the couch, and his mom is crying while his dad interrogates Ren about mangling the poor frog. It's based on a highly emotional scene that actually happened. I got caught with cigarettes when I was about twelve years old, and my parents were sitting on the couch interrogating me. Of course, I denied everything. My mom was crying and I felt awful. The event obviously left a big impression on me so I exaggerated it and put it into this cartoon.

Title card, background art and
scene from "Ren Seeks Help", 2004.

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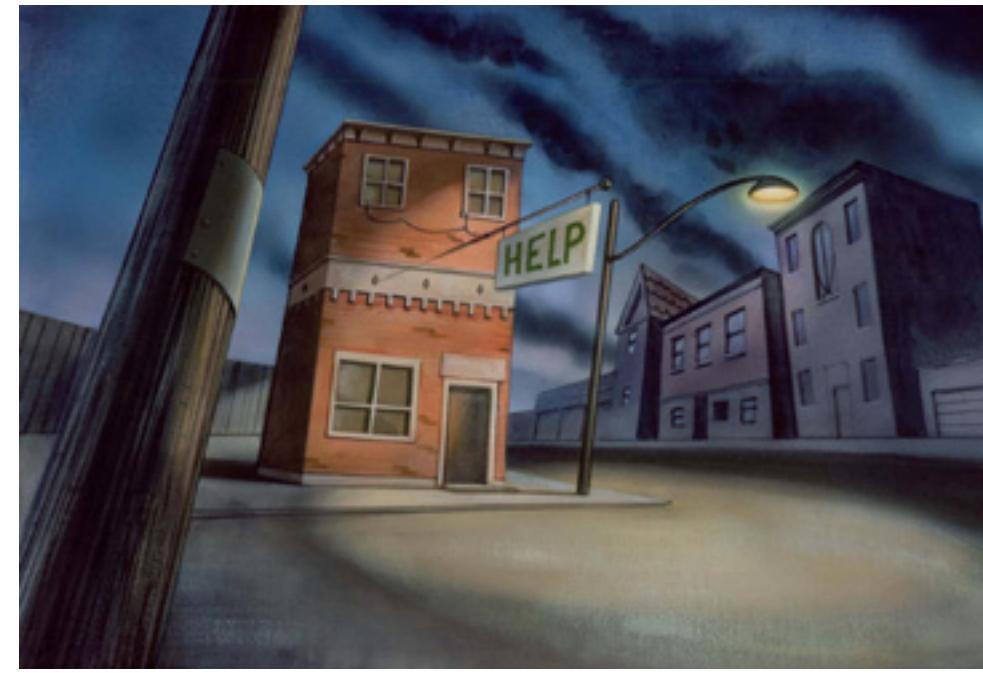
Life Sucks

Unfortunately, one of our finest stories didn't get made—an epic Ren and Stimpy episode called "Life Sucks", conceived and put into production in 2004. The story explores the difference between Ren and Stimpy's outlook on life. They each look at the world and see the same things yet judge them in opposite ways. Stimpy is an optimist and Ren is a pessimist. In Life Sucks, Ren realizes it's his duty to cure Stimpy of his naivety and he takes him on a journey through biology, religion, history, and evolution in an attempt to make him wake up and smell the coffee. One of Ren's educational moments is his reading of the "Children's Crusade" book, drawn by Nick Cross in the style of Mary Blair's Golden Book illustrations. Here you can see both the framing sequence and Nick's amazing story-within-the-story.
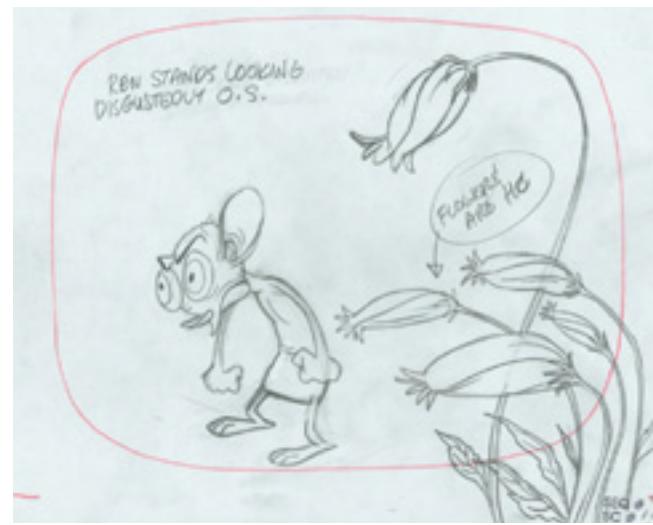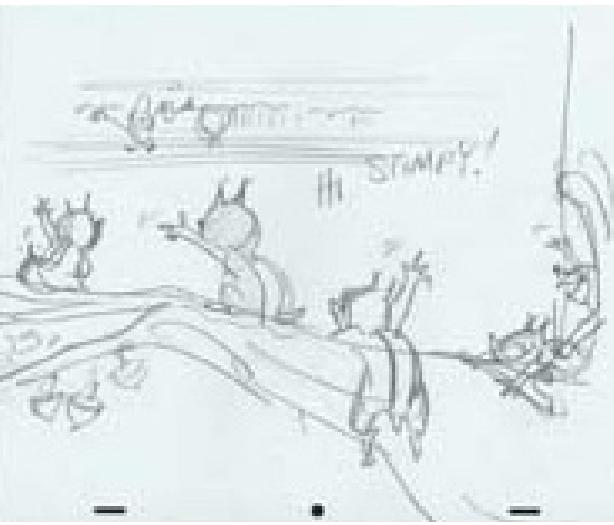
Ren sureptitiously watches Stimpy and becomes more and more outraged by his naive, overly optimistic world view,
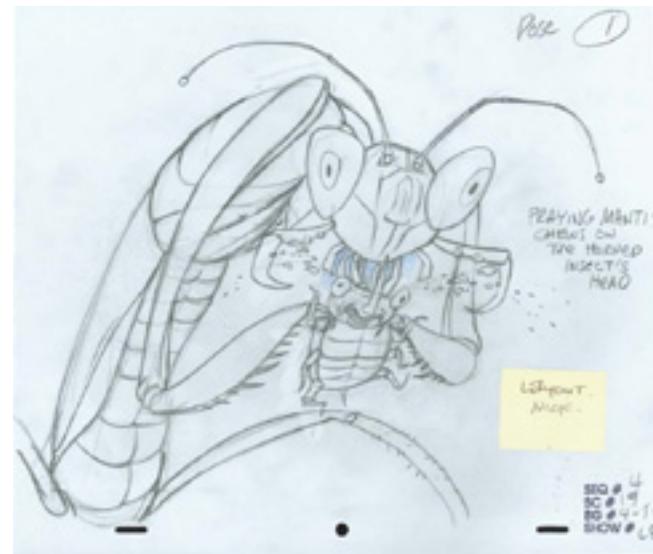
Ren educates Stimpy about the harsh realities of the world that he has not been privy to.

Overcome with despair, Stimpy requests an audience with Cat Jesus, to try and understand this new horrible reality.

Ren, feeling ashamed for causing Stimpy's bum trip, offers to read the distressed cat a storybook, "The Children's Crusade".
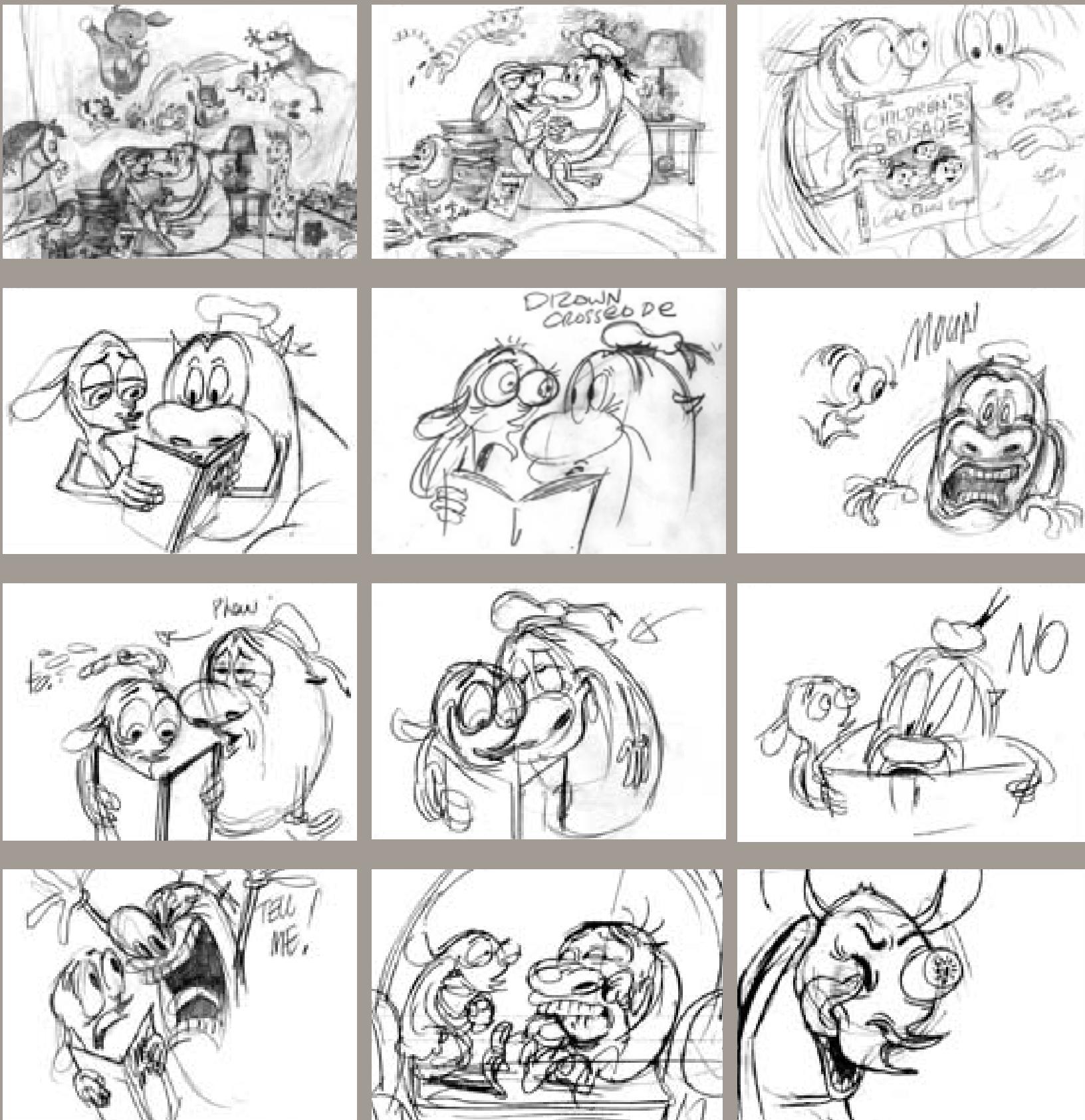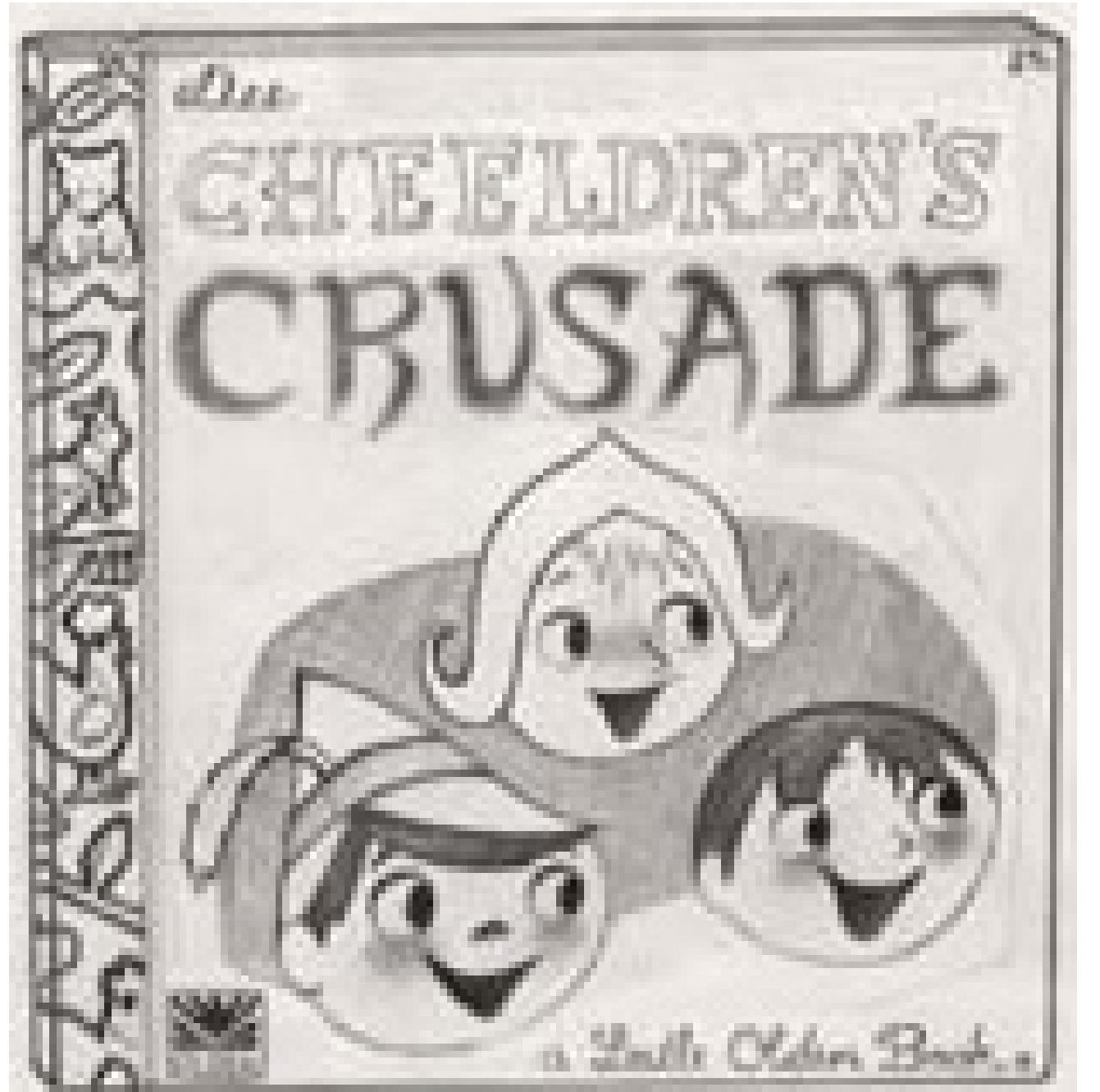
Ren selects the innocuous
"The Children's Crusade" to read
to Stimpy in order to cheer him up,
but it is hardly an uplifting read.

Starting innocently, the children
are slowly onset by a laundry list
of atrocities: drowning, freezing
to death and finally slaughter in
the midst of a holy war.
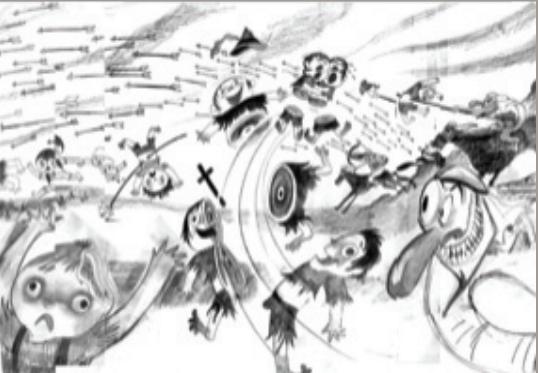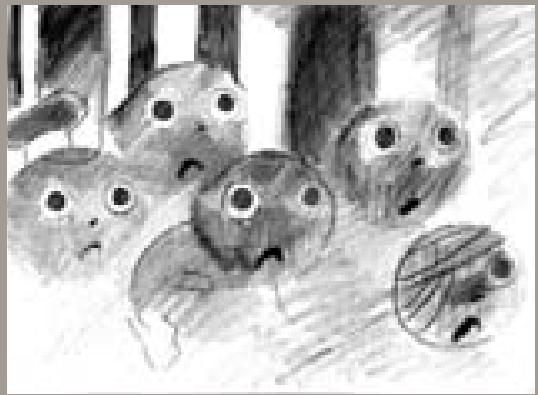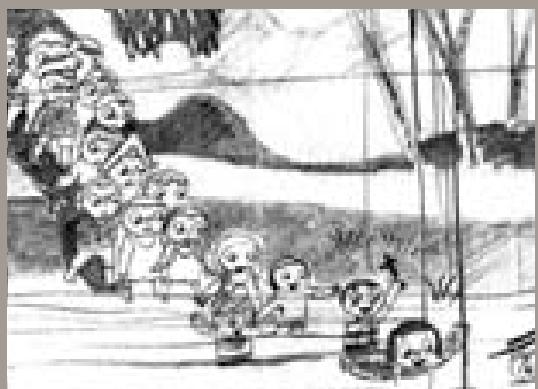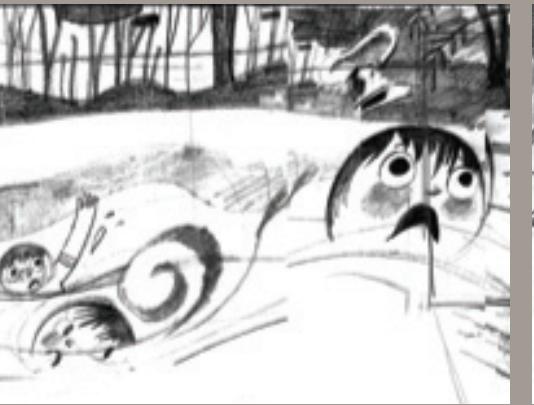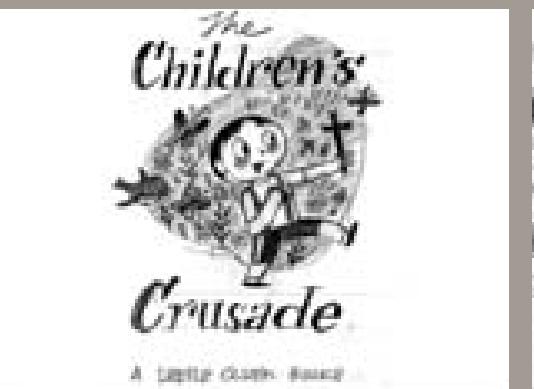
End

Since *Ren & Stimpy: Adult Party Cartoon* was cancelled, I haven't been able to afford to keep Spümcø open on my own. During the past few years, I've been directing commercials and rock videos while creating stories and characters on my own (like Kaspar the Unfriendly Bear) in case another window for cartoony cartoons opens up again. I've also launched numerous blogs to promote the traditional idea of cartoons to a younger generation of cartoonists who haven't grown up seeing all the stuff that inspired me.

To me, cartoons are, more than any other medium, the art form of fun. They are a distillation of the most exciting parts of life and imagination. There is a lot of necessary tedium to making cartoons, but we shouldn't pass on the tediousness to the audience. Audiences should simply be wowed by the magic. That has been the driving ambition throughout my career, and what I continue to aim for in the new cartoons that I create.

Painting by Bob Camp, circa 1990s.

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